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10 SHORT NOVELS

OCTOBER 15

MAGAZINE



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Inside front cover

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10-NOVELS

MAGAZINE

OCTOBER 1933

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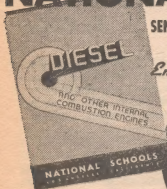
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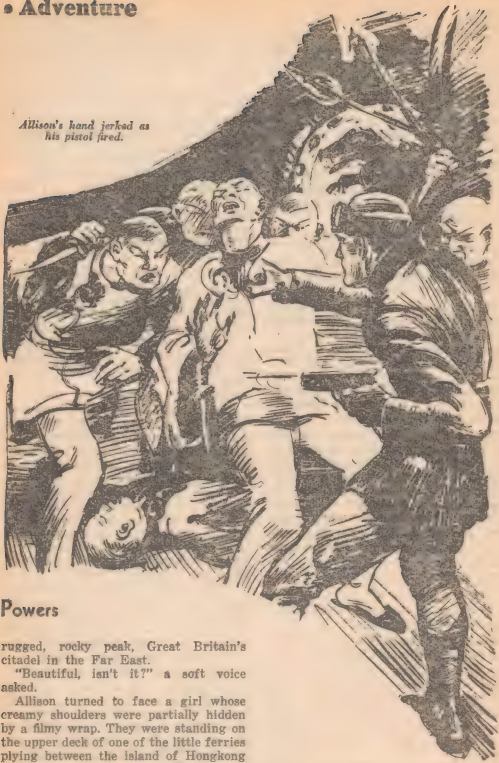
By Ralph

HUGH ALLISON'S lean face hardened as he stared at the exotic scene. He had been trained for years for the task before him, yet now that it was at hand, he felt a sudden uncertainty.

Before him was a scene which had inspired poets and artists, yet he was blind to its glory. The twinkling lights of Hongkong spread out like jewels on a cloth of midnight blue. Starting at the waterfront, they soared up to meet the stars, climbing until they merged at the

• Adventure

*Allison's hand jerked as
his pistol fired.*



Powers

rugged, rocky peak, Great Britain's citadel in the Far East.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" a soft voice asked.

Allison turned to face a girl whose creamy shoulders were partially hidden by a filmy wrap. They were standing on the upper deck of one of the little ferries plying between the Island of Hongkong and Kowloon upon the mainland.

"It almost takes your breath away, doesn't it?" he replied.

Dagmar Marsen nodded, her eyes fixed

upon the panorama of twinkling lights. Allison studied the girl's flaming beauty. He had heard tales about her that stirred

the pulses. Men had died because of Dagmar's smile. Some had perished at their own hands. Berton Whipple of the British Intelligence corps had blown out his brains after a hectic affair in Singapore. No one knew the reason, unless, perhaps, the British Secret Service, which knew how to keep silence.

Allison's gaze centered on the girl's eyes. They were studying the flashing lights on Hongkong. He saw the heavy lids lift a trifle. Then she stiffened with interest, and her lips moved as though she were reading. Hugh's glance followed the direction of her gaze.

Far up on the peak's rocky side a light was blinking. It was not the twinkle of the stars or the flickering of a lamp, but an irregular flash and darkness that was not without a cadence.

The man's eyes turned icy, and his right hand slipped into a pocket in which were a miniature tablet and tiny pencil. Those flashes and intervals of darkness were letters in the International code. The young man noted down one letter after another, and a frown flickered between his brows. The blinker light was sending a message in cypher.

The light ceased its blinking, and the girl relaxed. She moved a little closer. He looked into her face again. It was more than beautiful. It had a breathtaking quality seldom seen in northern climes. She was a sister to Cleopatra, or Beatrice Sforza come to earth again.

"I can hardly wait until tomorrow to see your fleet come in," the girl murmured.

"My fleet?"

"Yes, the American."

"But the British fleet is coming, too. Doesn't that intrigue you?"

She shook her head. "One tires of one's own people, you know," she remarked.

Hugh smiled. Dagmar was not British, he knew. She was not even European. He had read a *dossier* telling her activities before he came to Hongkong. She was a child of the Orient, an Eurasian, but she spoke half a dozen European tongues.

Now at last Hugh Allison was on her trail. He had gone to Kowloon to escort her to a dinner dance given by Sir Hubert Chater, to which he had arranged to have Dagmar invited.

THE little ferry neared the Hongkong shore, and a knot of men and women in evening dress trooped toward the rail. Dagmar turned to survey them, bowing and smiling to several.

Then her eyes rested on a man about forty, whose aquiline features had an almost hawklike cast. The girl's lips widened, then suddenly relaxed. The man had looked away.

Hugh Allison leaned toward her to whisper, "Do you know that fellow?"

"No. Distinguished-looking, isn't he?"

"Yes. He might be from one of the Prussian Guard regiments or a *Rittmeister* in the Hussars."

"I have never cared for Germans," the girl murmured.

Once more Hugh Allison smiled inwardly. He had seen a signal flashed between those two when their eyes met. Once more he had caught Dagmar lying.

The little ferry nosed into the slip, and the barrier dropped. Rickshaw and sedan-chair coolies pressed forward, and Allison signaled to a man in the foremost rank.

"Two piecee rickshaw," he called.

Hugh helped Dagmar into her seat and climbed into his own vehicle. The men picked up their shafts and started up the street on the run. As the girl's rickshaw swept ahead, Allison leaned forward and touched his own runner on the shoulder.

"Listen, Ho," he said in lowered tone, "find out who's testing out a blinker light up top-side near the Peak. I must know tonight. Send a chit into the hotel. I'll be at Sir Hubert Chater's dinner."

"Can do," the man panted, increasing his speed.

After a short run, they reached the hotel. Tall, turbanned Sikhs guarded the doors. Within, bearded giants stood like statues, towering above the Chinese servants and Occidental guests. They were the guardsmen of the Orient.

Hugh Allison glanced around as they settled on a divan and signaled a boy for cocktails. The room was more crowded than usual. Englishmen and Americans had come from scattered settlements in the Far East to be present when the fleets met in Hongkong. Filled with political significance, the mingling of officers and men from dreadnaughts and destroyers would be a gesture to the world telling of Anglo-American solidarity.

A boy appeared with cocktails and Hugh and Dagmar took up their glasses. The girl smiled up into the man's eyes, but they remained inscrutable. A flush crossed her cheek. She felt a challenge in this self-contained American. She knew that he, too, was playing a game, but she fenced with the cleverest. She glanced across the room to see a tall Englishman in evening dress staring in her direction. He was Carlton Chumleigh, the British Secret Service ace. She lifted her glass to him and bowed.

"Who is that?" Allison asked.

"Don't you know him?"

Hugh had had a long talk with Chumleigh that afternoon, but he ignored the question. The Englishman was working along the same lines, but he was reserved and wary, keeping his knowledge to himself.

"I thought you and—"

Dagmar Marsen paused as a girl came across the lounge, her hands outtheld and her eyes on Hugh Allison. Blonde, small and slender, Betty Barrow looked almost a child in the presence of Dagmar, although they were nearly the same age.

"Hugh Allison!" she exclaimed, as the young man sprang to his feet. "I thought you were—" She hesitated as she caught the warning in his eyes. "They told me you were touring the world," she added quickly.

"I am, but I can't seem to get farther than Hongkong," he said, and turned to Dagmar. "This is Miss Barrow, Miss Marsen. Her father is the commander of the American fleet. And Miss Marsen," he added, to Betty, "is a tourist, like myself, wandering footloose, looking at the world."

Both girls smiled, but their eyes thrust deep, for each sensed an adversary in the other. It was not a triangle where two women struggled for a man's love. It was an intuitive clash of races and civilizations. Dagmar Marsen recognized an obstacle to her capture of Hugh Allison, and his enslavement was a large part of her strategy.

"Mother and I came over from Manila yesterday," Betty told them. "We couldn't miss the parties they're—" She paused as a monocled Englishman hurried to where the three were standing.

Sir Hubert Chater, their host, was bustling through the lounge to assemble

his party. He grasped Betty Barrow by the hand and wrung it with delight.

"You are heaven-sent, my dear," he told her. "One of my guests is ill. Won't you dine with us?"

The girl glanced at Hugh Allison and then at Dagmar.

"Of course. I'd be delighted," she replied.

"By Jove, that's ripping! And now let me present your partner at the table."

Hugh Allison looked around to see the hawk-faced man he had noticed in the Kowloon ferry.

"This is Baron von Schlechtweg," Sir Hubert announced. "Miss Barrow, Miss Marsen and Mr. Allison."

The German clicked his heels and bowed stiffly from the hips. His gray eyes met Dagmar's. There was no sign of recognition.

"I'm glad to know you, baron," Allison said, as the man looked in his direction.

Led by Sir Hubert, they started for the small dining room the knight had engaged. As they neared the door, Allison saw a Japanese in evening dress approach. The man's sloe eyes were raised to meet von Schlechtweg's. They held for a moment, then flicked away.

"What's the matter?" Dagmar asked, her hand tightening on Allison's arm.

"Nothing. Why?"

"I felt your muscles contract as though you were going to strike some one," she answered with a slight smile.

AS they entered the dining room, Dagmar paused to speak to the Japanese. Although Count Uchida wore Occidental dress, his wife was attired in native costume. A kimono of soft wisteria shade made her doll-like figure even more diminutive. Her hair, a triumph of the dresser's art, was piled and looped in a fashion that had taken hours to accomplish. As Hugh Allison looked into her face, he felt as if he were viewing a painting by a master of old Japan.

There was a swift flow of whispered syllables as Allison neared. Count Uchida was speaking to his wife. The American's face was immobile. Many of his long years of preparation for the task before him had been given to a study of the Japanese language.

"Be careful. This is the American,"

Uchida had whispered in his native tongue.

The countess's narrow eyes flicked their understanding. Then she turned to smile at Dagmar and Hugh Allison.

"Good evening, count," Dagmar greeted him. "In Hongkong to see the fleets?"

The little man bowed and glanced in Baron von Schlechtweg's direction.

"Have you met Mr. Allison?" Dagmar went on.

"No, ver' sorry, but—no."

"Then you must. This is Count Uchida and his countess," Dagmar said to Hugh. "If you remember, Count Uchida was Admiral Yamamoto's technical adviser on submarines during the London conference."

The little man's eyes snapped angrily as Dagmar continued, but he bowed and extended a slender hand to the American.

"Ver' glad to meet," he murmured.

Allison glanced at Dagmar. The drama had taken a new turn. He had never met Count Uchida before, but he remembered a tale that had been whispered in the wake of the unhappy London conference. The plans for a mysterious underwater boat projected by the British had been stolen during Uchida's stay in London.

The baron was an expert on submarines, and his name had been connected with the theft from the day of its discovery. However, all efforts by the British Intelligence Corps to confirm the suspicion had proved fruitless.

"And have you met Baron von Schlechtweg?" Sir Hubert Chater was presenting his guests to each other.

Count and Countess Uchida bobbed their heads, and the German clicked his heels. Hugh Allison watched the pantomime. He was certain that all these people had not only met before, but knew each other intimately.

The dinner party was small, but representative of cosmopolitan Hongkong. Carlton Chumleigh had as his partner Lady Gerakine Manor, famous as an explorer in Tibet and Mongolia. A French colonel from Indo-China, Sir Robert Tze, a wealthy Chinese who had been knighted by the British crown, and his wife completed the list of guests.

The dining parlor was screened only from the grill room, off which it opened, and the music from the orchestra could be heard distinctly. Several of the guests

arose to dance, among them Baron von Schlechtweg, who led Countess Uchida to the floor. Hugh heard the German address the countess in fluent, although rather guttural Japanese.

"Do you tango?" Hugh asked Dagmar, as the orchestra started another number.

"Just a little."

"Let's try it."

THE girl danced with amazing ease and grace. Hugh looked down into her face, and saw her dark eyes raised to his and felt the enormous appeal of her beauty.

As Allison looked down into Dagmar's face, he realized that in spite of her loveliness, this woman would destroy him if it fitted her strategy. More than that, he felt that she was part of a net of spies, closing in on him, seeking to checkmate his efforts.

"I wonder who the man back of it all is—von Schlechtweg or Uchida?" This question kept racing through Allison's mind as they continued to dance.

A few minutes later, he was convinced it was the Japanese. The little count took Dagmar as a dancing partner, while Allison led Betty to the floor. Hugh intentionally guided his partner to where Dagmar and Uchida were dancing. He followed their movements with half-veiled eyes.

"What's the show?" Betty asked, as she noted that Allison was watching them.

"No show, but—" His words ended suddenly. He saw Uchida's coat fold back as Dagmar's fingers slipped along his polished shirt front. In another moment her hand reappeared, and in it was an envelope.

"Did you see that?" Betty whispered. Allison nodded.

"I think he knew she was taking it," the girl murmured.

"I wish I could be sure."

"A plot?" The girl's eyes were eager. Allison's lids blinked an affirmative.

"Like to have that letter?" she asked.

"Very much."

"I'll have it for you before the party's over."

"How?"

"Leave it to me."

When the dance ended, they returned to the dining room. Hugh could see that

Dagmar was glowing with excitement. Hugh Allison watched her with growing suspicion.

Suddenly he felt a touch on his shoulder and turned to see a page boy with a letter upon his tray.

"Mr. All-eye-song?" the boy asked.

"Yes, I'm Mr. Allison."

Hugh could feel Dagmar lean forward as he took up the note and dropped a silver piece upon the tray. Across the table from him, Baron von Schlechtweg and Count Uchida were watching, their glances half-veiled.

"Pardon me," the American said, rising. "I'm afraid I shall have to write an answer to this immediately."

"Don't be gone too long," Dagmar warned him, nodding toward the orchestra. "I believe there's going to be another tango."

Allison hurried into the writing room that opened off the lounge. He opened the letter to stare at a cramped hand that was not familiar with English.

"Blinker light blong man name Gross—Ho."

Gross! Hugh Allison's face was grim as he read that name. Eric Gross—in Hongkong! Once he had been the most ruthless of the Kaiser's submarine commanders, and he had risen to high position in post-war Germany. Disgrace and exile had followed, but Gross had never stopped working to win favor with the government that had disgraced him. He had tried during the London conference to break the budding *entente* between the British and American governments. He had labored with the Japanese, using his skill as a master of intrigue, but his plots had failed.

Hugh struck a match, held it to Ho's letter and threw the ashes into a sand-filled bowl. Then he took a blank sheet of paper and placed it in the envelope which had contained Ho's note. On his way back to the dining room, he saw Conrow, his aid and cypher expert, strolling in the lounge.

Allison stepped to a desk and made a hurried copy of the code message flashed out by blinker light. Then he beckoned to Conrow.

"Get busy," he told the man, "and break this for me. It looks like a simple substitution cypher." Hugh paused. Palms that screened the lounge from the writing room had been parted by thin,

dark fingers, and he caught a glimpse of Count Uchida's black hair. The Japanese was spying on him. Then he glanced around to see Count von Schlechtweg peering from the door leading into the bar. He, too, was on the watch.

"What was that, boss?" Conrow asked.

"See that Jap back of the palms? No, don't look at him. Get to talking with him. Hold him for fifteen minutes—any way you can. Hint that you can get the key to the new diplomatic code—for a consideration. Get his attention, and hold it. Then, after you let him go, rush me a translation of this stuff."

Allison turned and crossed the writing room toward the bar. Baron von Schlechtweg was there. He bowed and smiled. "I popped out for a bit of beer," he said. "I prefer it to champagne."

"I don't blame you," the American replied. "So do I. Won't you have one with me?"

Once more the baron bowed, and they drank together.

THEY finally returned to the small dining room. Betty Barrow and Dagmar had returned to their places, and he took the American girl out onto the dance floor.

"I spilled some wine on her dress—" Betty began, as they danced.

"Just a minute. I haven't any time to lose," Hugh broke in, as they swung toward the palm court. "Hide in here. I'll be back soon."

He left the astonished girl and dashed to a house telephone. Conrow was holding Baron Uchida with false offers to sell the key to the diplomatic code. Allison put in a call to the private dining room in which Baron von Schlechtweg remained. In another moment, he had the German on the line.

"This is Uchida," Hugh spoke in Japanese, thinning his voice to imitate the little count. "I was afraid to talk in there, but I must send a special message—about the U-boat."

Allison knew that his ability to speak Japanese would not pass muster with a native, but he was sure he spoke it better than von Schlechtweg. The mechanical sounds of the telephone would also aid in the deception.

"The Squid, you mean?" the German asked in the same tongue.

"Yes. You see—"

"Don't worry about that. You will not be involved. Gross is acting as a private individual. No nation is responsible. We expect it within—" Von Schlechtweg stopped. The wisp of a Teutonic oath came over the wire. Then the voice sounded again, still speaking Japanese.

"Just one moment, Uchida San," the German said in a suave tone. "I must—"

Hugh Allison slid the receiver onto the hook and hurried to where Betty was waiting. In another moment, they were dancing again. Allison knew what had happened at the other end of the wire. Conrow had been unable to hold Uchida, and the Japanese had returned. Von Schlechtweg had seen him, and had tried to hold Hugh on the line until he could locate the call.

"What's the matter?" Betty asked.

"Nothing," Hugh muttered. "But remember—I've been dancing with you all the time."

In another moment, Baron von Schlechtweg cut in. Hugh Allison surrendered with a bow, then turned to where Count Uchida was staring at him through heavily lidded Oriental eyes.

Few poker players could have equalled the calm impenetrability of Hugh Allison as he joined the little Japanese nobleman. He knew that he had trapped the two and that they suspected him, but his eyes were guileless as they met the count's glance.

"Our friend Sir Robert dances wonderfully, for a Chinese," Uchida remarked, nodding toward the Oriental.

"Yes, he makes some of us westerners look rather awkward—"

"Look out behind you!" The words were snapped at him in Japanese.

Hugh Allison did not move. He was expecting such a trick as this.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked. "What did you say, count?"

The Oriental's eyes flicked a glance from one corner.

"Nothing, my friend. I was just voicing my admiration for Sir Robert's dancing. For a moment I forgot myself, and spoke in Japanese."

"No wonder I didn't understand you," Hugh laughed. "Now, if you'll pardon me, I think the baron has danced long enough with Miss Barrow."

The American waited until the baron and Betty had circled the floor; then he cut in.

"He did ask if you and I had been dancing all that time," the girl told him.

"I was sure he would. But that isn't the big news. The count picked my pocket while we were talking. I had an envelope filled with blank paper, and he couldn't keep his fingers off it."

The girl's eyes sparkled. "I have news for you, too. I got this." She reached into the front of her dress and extracted an envelope.

"I had to spill wine on Dagmar's dress," she explained, "but I got the letter."

MORNING was near when Hugh escorted Dagmar to the rooms she had reserved in the hotel. Although the discoveries he had made sent the blood tingling through his veins, he was calm when he bade her goodnight.

"I shall see you tomorrow, shan't I?" She smiled up into his eyes.

"Of course." He bent to kiss her hand.

He waited until the door had closed behind her and then turned down the hall, but his steps did not quicken. Hidden eyes would be watching him, he knew. As soon as he was within his own rooms, however, he tossed aside his assumed languor. He ripped open the envelope Betty had stolen from Dagmar. It was in cypher. A hurried check of the composition of the artificial words making up the message told him that it was one of the many variations of the Japanese Kana code. It would take time to break.

He dashed down the hall to where Conrow, his cypher expert, was quartered, and knocked on the door. There was no answer. He tried the knob, and when it yielded, he stepped inside, to find the lights blazing and Conrow at his desk, his head resting on his arms.

"Say, old-timer," Hugh called softly, "the fleets will be here soon, wake up. Here's something—"

He grasped the man by the shoulder, and his words stopped. The man's body was cold, lifeless. A hurried examination showed no sign of a wound. He started to lift the body, and the head fell forward at an unnatural angle. The neck had been broken.

Allison summoned the clerk on duty in the hotel office, then got in contact by telephone with Carlton Chumleigh, of the British Secret Service.

"Can you come over to Room 418?" he asked the Englishman.

A grumbling assent buzzed from the receiver.

Hugh Allison walked back and forth, awaiting the coming of the room clerk. He could see that Conrow's desk had been swept clear of all papers. The copy of the blinker-light message was not there. Neither were a couple of unimportant code cablegrams.

Suddenly the door opened, and the night clerk and several Sikh guards entered. The bearded sergeant in charge of the police glanced at Conrow's distorted neck and shook his head.

"Thuggee," he said to Allison.

"What?"

"Strangle cloth. Throw over head, then twist. Do all time in India."

"You mean Thugs, those professional murderers?"

The man nodded.

"This is terrible!" the hotel clerk moaned. "If it should get out that a guest was strangled in his room, it would—"

"It mustn't get out," Allison broke in. "Not while the fleets are here—" He paused as a knock sounded, and Carlton Chumleigh entered.

"I believe you wanted to see me, Allison," the Englishman said.

"Yes. A friend of mine—" Hugh nodded toward Conrow's lifeless body. "I came in here and found him—like this."

"Stroke?"

"The sergeant, here, says it's the work of Thuggee, those professional Indian stranglers, you know."

"So?" Chumleigh examined the body, then nodded his head. "Their work, all right. I ran across some of it when I was in Bombay. Neat job. Anything I can do?"

Allison nodded and then signed to the Sikhs to take the body from the room. He waited until he and Chumleigh were alone.

"If possible, I'd like to keep this thing from being made public for a few days," he said. "Would you mind asking the local police to bury the report?"

"Not at all. In fact, I fancy they'll be jolly glad to do it."

"And your dossier on Dagmar Marsen—may I see it?"

"I'm sorry. I think it's been forwarded to London."

Hugh's face did not change its expression, but he knew that the British agent was lying.

"You don't remember anything in it about her picture being found in Eric Gross's baggage when it was searched in London?" he inquired.

Chumleigh fingered his chin as though trying to remember. "Really, I can't recall," he said finally. "Sorry, old top, but—"

"Oh, that's all right," Allison smiled. "Thanks a lot for your help."

"Glad to give it." The Englishman strolled toward the door. "Call on me any time. Hands across the sea, you know."

But with the door closed, Allison's smile vanished. Chumleigh would not work with the enemy, but he would lend small aid to his allies. He was British first and last.

After examining the room, Allison went downstairs to where his aid's body had been taken. A discolored streak showed where the strangling cloth had been thrown about the young man's neck. Bedded in that lethal crease was a strand of dark silk. Hugh carefully picked it out and placed it in an envelope.

"Turban cloth—always use," the Sikh sergeant said, pointing to his own head covering. "Ver' quick, ver' silent."

Allison nodded. Then he hurried back to his own room. Conrow was dead and could not help him, but he still had his own copy of the blinker-light message and the letter Betty Barrow had taken from Dagmar. He had taken the Black Chamber course in his preparation for Intelligence service work, and he knew how codes were broken. He would have to solve the problem himself. The fleets would drop anchor within a few hours.

A ROOM boy brought Allison a pot of strong black coffee, and he set to work on the final fragments of the blinker-light message.

He spread his crumpled notes before him. The words were of uneven length, so he was dealing with a cypher, not a code. His first guess must be at the language in which the message was written. He suspected German, but it failed.

to respond to the usual tests of frequency in that tongue.

A rapid analysis disclosed a high frequency of vowels such as are found in Spanish, Italian and Portuguese. Hugh tried first one, then another language. He had specialized in Oriental tongues, but knew Spanish from his early days at Annapolis, and this cypher, he found, was very much like Spanish.

Then he essayed a series of scientific substitutions. It was a process which had been figured out in the Black Chamber. That part of the message Hugh had copied read:

DXQHG JOHG RTZGHQRG WQSEQ
IQHUIVQ QK JSQHRT

The frequency of the letter "Q" held his attention. It must be one of the vowels often encountered in a Latin language. The first three words ended in "G"—another vowel. With these definitely identified, Allison's task was made easier. With further substitutions, the message fell apart. It now read:

QUANDO MINO DETONADO BAR-
CA HANGHWA AL MAR GRANDE.

He had no trouble in translating all but two words, and he wrote down:

WHEN THE MINE DETONATES,
THE SHIP (HANGWA) TO THE SEA
GRANDE.

"*Hangwa*," he muttered. "It can mean anything. This is Macao Portuguese, with Chinese words in it. *Hanghwa*—probably sinks. That's what a ship does when a mine detonates."

Then his eyes fastened on the last word, "*Grande*." It meant "big," of course, but . . .

The thunder of guns made him start from his chair. He rushed to the window and raised the shade. Morning had come.

The fleet was in.

As the roaring increased, a new thought flashed through Hugh's mind.

"*Grande* means big — and so does Gross! It's his signature, Eric Gross!"

Allison paced up and down the room as thoughts poured through his mind. Dagmar Marsen had read those words. She was working for Gross. He had penetrated the covert signals between her and Baron von Schlechtweg. Count Uchida was a party to the plot—or was he the master? That was more logical.

He took out the letter Betty Barrow had stolen from Dagmar and laid it on the

table. His tired eyes widened as he glanced at the sheet. It had borne a series of ten-letter code words when he glanced at it before going to Conrow's room. Now it was only a blank, unmarked sheet of paper.

Hugh examined it carefully. The writing had faded, but he could detect places here and there where a pen had marred the texture of the paper. He had been wrong, after all. It was the same sheet, but the writing had disappeared. He must find a means to restore it.

He went to his trunk and took out a small iodine fuming outfit. The American Black Chamber had discovered during the World War that the fumes of iodine would develop most artificially faded writings. He tried this method, but the sheet remained blank. Next he tried heat, but without effect.

"I've got to get it," he kept mumbling. He paused as a knock sounded, and his room boy appeared with a package of laundry.

"Coolie man name Ho say give you," the servant announced.

"Thanks." Hugh tossed the man a tip.

As soon as the door closed, he ripped open the bundle. On the cuff of the second shirt he found a message.

"Little underwater ship unloaded in Canton off Chinese junk. Find more news another day."

Hugh hurriedly washed the writing off and threw the shirt aside. The jig-saw puzzle was fitting together. Several important pieces were missing, but he would soon find them. He must.

He turned to the radio apparatus he had installed in his rooms soon after his arrival in Hongkong. It was equipped with an automatic tape that received all telegraphic signals. Another slowly moving cylinder registered the vibrations of words being spoken over short-wave sets.

Allison had tuned in on a frequency that he had suspected of being used by the ring he was fighting. He knew that Uchida, von Schlechtweg and Dagmar had small sets over which mysterious messages were sent.

He studied the tape and cylinder. There was plenty of evidence that the station he suspected had been in operation, but no messages had been sent by dots and dashes. These would have registered. The cylinder, however, showed that a voice had spoken from somewhere.

"I'll put a wax record on this time," he mumbled. "Then perhaps I'll get something."

He made the change, and began pacing up and down. That mysterious voice might speak again.

Suddenly his restless pacing stopped. The knob of his door was turning slowly, noiselessly.

"Who is it? What do you want?" he said sharply.

The door burst open and a white-clad figure leaped in. Hugh Allison caught a flash of a gaunt, dark face and glittering black eyes. Then something shot through the air like a flying serpent. It fell across the American's shoulders and swiftly tightened.

The strangler!

Allison twisted and partially threw off the deadly silken folds. Then he and the thug rushed at each other.

The savage twist which the Thug had given his strangling cloth had wrenched Hugh's neck severely, but the assassin had missed a perfect cast. Allison had escaped the quick, silent death, which had ended Conrow's career. As they closed in, Hugh's fists doubled, and he drove a smashing right into the Thug's gaunt face.

He heard a grunt as the blow landed, and the man went limp. A crashing left landed, and the emaciated figure was stretched upon the floor. The man's eyes were closed, as if in sleep.

Hugh stepped to the door and looked out. There was no hall boy in sight. He tried his telephone, but it had been put out of order.

"Hey, boy," he called down the hall, "come here—*fy tee*—"

At a slight sound behind him, Allison spun around. The Thug had scrambled to his feet and was racing toward the French doors opening onto a balcony that ran the length of the hotel. Allison charged after him, but by the time he reached the doors, the man had disappeared.

A room boy arrived. Then came Siekh police and a British detective who was attached to the hotel. A search revealed no trace of the dark-skinned murderer.

"Bad business, sir," the detective muttered, when the hunt had been abandoned. "One guest gets done in, and now hanoother 'as 'is life threatened—"

"Never mind that," Allison interrupt-

ed. "All you can do now is see that no one breaks in again."

"I'll attend to that, sir. We'll station guards hinside and hout. No Chinese—we'll 'ave Siekhs, sir. They kill first, and hargue hafterwards."

"See to it right away. I—" He paused as a page appeared with a chit from Dagmar. She was waiting for him in the lounge. He glanced at his watch. Afternoon had come, and he had not slept. Still, he must keep watch on the spy ring.

"Tell missee I come *fy tee*," he told the boy.

CHANGING into a suit of cool pongee, Allison descended to the main floor. It was thronged. Officers had come ashore from the warships, and in addition, there were many men in mufti.

Hugh glanced from one face to another. He knew that the Secret Service aces of virtually every power in Europe were in that room. Asia, too, was represented. He saw Count Uchida sipping tea with several countrymen who were posing as tourists from a Japanese liner anchored in the harbor.

Then he caught a glimpse of Carlton Chumleigh. The Britisher was watching the Japanese with hawklike eyes.

Hugh circled the room, hoping to identify some of the many spies he knew were there.

"Aren't you speaking to your friends today?" a girl's voice called.

He turned to see Betty Barrow and Dagmar seated on a divan, with cocktails before them.

"Good morning—or I suppose I should say good afternoon," Dagmar greeted him. "We are making plans for the rest of the day."

Her dark eyes were flashing, and Allison felt that she was planning something. He waited for her first move.

"What can we do?" Betty asked.

"We might visit one of those new tea houses Count Uchida was describing," Dagmar suggested casually. "They might amuse you, Miss Barrow."

Hugh stiffened as though he had heard a warning bell, and his eyes narrowed. Danger lurked in the woman's suggestion—danger to Betty. He was certain Dagmar knew that Betty had stolen Uchida's letter from her—and she would be plotting revenge.

"Oh, tea houses are all alike," he said.

"Not all of them." Dagmar looked up into his eyes. "And the count has asked us to have tiffin with him. Of course, if you and Miss Barrow have made other arrangements—"

"I haven't," Betty broke in.

Hugh glanced at her. He wished that this girl had never entered the dangerous game. He had to be with these people and watch them constantly, but he was filled with foreboding for her. Yet he had no choice—he must keep always on the watch.

"That sounds great," he told Dagmar, "but Betty, didn't you promise your mother—"

"She and Daddy have gone to the governor general's for tea," the girl replied, "and I got out of that."

"But you—" Allison paused as a tall figure appeared before them and bowed.

"Hello, everyone," von Schlechtweg greeted them. "I was wondering what I would do with my afternoon—and now I find you to help me."

Hugh looked up. He was certain Dagmar had signaled the German to join them, and he watched the two narrowly.

"We're planning a slumming party," Betty announced gaily.

"Slumming? I don't believe—"

"We're going to one of those new tea houses Count Uchida told us about," Dagmar explained. "Wouldn't you like to join us?"

She looked up in to the baron's face, and Allison intercepted a glance that was almost a command. Dagmar seemed to be passing an order from their joint master. The danger loomed greater than ever, yet Allison saw no way to keep Betty out of it without giving away his suspicions.

"I'd love to see it," Betty insisted. "It's called the Doorway to a Thousand Delights, and it sounds fascinating. She leaped to her feet.

Hugh Allison led the way to the *porte cochère*, noticing on the way that Count Uchida was no longer chatting with his Japanese friends. He glanced out into the compound, where the rickshaw coolies stayed. Ho, his regular man, was not there, but Hugh recognized the coolie who had been Ho's companion on previous occasions, and he signaled to him.

"Four piecee rickshaw," he shouted.

"No, five," he heard Dagmar call. "Here's the count, and he's going with us."

Allison turned to see Uchida bowing and smiling. The young man's eyes turned to Betty Barrow.

"Haden't you better stay here?" He made one more effort to keep her out of danger. She shook her head defiantly. "Nothing could keep me away," she answered.

Allison glanced at Uchida, Dagmar and von Schlechtweg as they clambered into their rickshaws. They were smiling with satisfaction. As the little vehicles raced down Queen's Road, Hugh touched his runner on the shoulder.

"Get hold of Ho as soon as we get there," he said in a low tone.

"Can do," the man replied, dashing on with unchecked speed.

BUILT out over the waters that lap Hongkong's rocky shore, the Door to a Thousand Delights was a temple dedicated to the epicurians of two hemispheres. Its green-tiled roof dipped in a graceful curve, shining like a colossal emerald in the bright afternoon sunlight.

Within, the place was ornate and garish. Here were tables of teak, inlaid with mother of pearl, and rosewood chairs whose seats were made of colorful stone from Szuchuen. Catering to both Chinese and Occidental gourmets, the menu ran a gamut from bird's nest pudding and shark fins to caviar and truffles.

On the first floor, an orchestra of dark-skinned Gaoese played tangoes and rumbas, while above, a Chinese band pounded gongs and crashed cymbals, and the shrill shriek of the native fiddle continued ceaselessly, both night and day.

But the Door to a Thousand Delights had not won its fame or patronage by the variety of its cuisine or the pulsing throb of its tangoes. Hongkong is one of the few places in the world where opium may be smoked openly and with legal license. The Door, therefore, catered to the lovers of the poppy.

"This will be my party," Count Uchida flashed his mirthless smile from one to another. "I have reserved places."

A head waiter, gorgeously attired in red and gold silk, escorted them to a room that overlooked the water.

Betty Barrow sniffed the pungent odor that hung over the whole establishment. "What is it?" she asked Dagmar.

"Tears of the poppy. Like to try it?"

"No, I don't think so."

"I'm told it's a rather interesting experience," said Baron von Schlechtweg.

"But it's so much trouble," Betty replied. "I've seen it done in motion pictures, and it looks messy."

"Not at all," Dagmar laughed. "Wait—I'll show you." She signaled to a waiter, who came with obsequious haste.

The man bobbed his head and spoke in Cantonese. Dagmar replied with a flood of sing-song syllables. Allison glanced at her quickly. Only a native of the China coast could have spoken with that fluent ease.

The woman flushed as she realized her mistake.

"You see, I've been to places like this before," she said hastily, "so I know the words."

She stretched herself on one of the teakwood couches when the waiter returned, bearing a silver tray upon which were pipe, lamp and those slender silver tools with which the opium smoker prepares his drug. First she picked up a slender instrument, not unlike a knitting needle, but spatulated at the ends.

"This is a *yen kok*," she told Betty. "Now watch."

She scooped up a small ball of the black, gummy opium and held it over the flame of a peanut oil lamp, dexterously twisting and turning it. The opium swelled and bubbled, turning from a dark, tarry mass into a light, warm brown. Now Dagmar took up a thick-stemmed pipe. With a skilful movement she inserted the cooked opium into a small hole and then held it over the flame again.

A gurgling sound came from the pipe as she inhaled. She took several deep inhalations, and then laid the pipe aside.

"There you are, Miss Barrow. That's all there is to it. Like to try?"

"No, thanks."

"But, my dear——" Dagmar pressed.

Count Uchida's buttony eyes flashed a signal to the woman, and she paused.

"Of course she is not going to smoke opium," the little count declared. "Ver' bad habit. Chinese smoke poppy, but Japanese know too much."

Music sounded from the public dining room. The Gaoese had begun the Carica, playing it with a strange barbaric rhythm. Dagmar glanced toward Hugh, her dark eyes low-lidded and filled with promise, but as he arose, Count Uchida

took her by the arm and led her to the floor.

Allison turned to Betty, and they followed the Japanese out to the dance floor.

"You shouldn't have come," he told her. "I'd take you home, but I must stay to watch these three."

"Do you really think——"

"That attempt to get you to smoke was part of this game. Now they'll try something else. An admiral's daughter is fair game in a battle like this."

AFTER their dance, they returned to the dining room, to find Count Uchida supervising the serving of pigeon eggs shirred in small individual silver dishes. Tiny shrimp, scarcely larger than beans, had been scattered over them, giving a flavor that was strangely delicious. "Chinese do know how to cook," Count Uchida admitted grudgingly, "but in Japan——"

He stopped as the head waiter entered the room.

"Misto All-eye-song in you' party?" he inquired.

Hugh nodded. "I am he."

"Coolie man name Ho say he must see," the waiter informed him. "Just come from Canton."

Allison bowed to those around the table. "If you'll excuse me," he said.

He followed the waiter down a flight of steps that led to the compound where the rickshaw coolies awaited their fares. Instead of going into the yard, however, the man turned down a winding passage and pointed ahead.

"Him there. I tol' him come inside."

Hugh cast a suspicious glance at the Chinese, but his yellow face was wooden. He went ahead, but his hand rested on the automatic pistol he carried beneath his left arm. He had told his rickshaw runner to have Ho report immediately, but even so, he was filled with suspicion of this move.

"Where?" he asked over his shoulder.

The head waiter had gone. In his place was a towering Chinese whose bare arms were marked with the tattooed outlines of blue dragons. He was a Ying Lee man, Allison knew, a member of a powerful anti-British society. He had learned that the shadowy enemies he had been fighting had enlisted the Ying Lee on their side, but this was his first conflict with that powerful tong.

"What do you want?" Hugh demanded.

"Makee chin-chin—talk, you savvy?"

"Yes, but I'm not talking to you down here."

"I think maybe yes." He stepped to one side, and Allison caught a glimpse of a knot of half-naked Chinese hiding behind a half-opened door. He whipped out his pistol and leveled it at the Ying Lee Giant.

"Let me by," he ordered.

"No can do. If fight, you go that way."

He gestured to the room, whose door had been half-opened. A pale light burned. Allison glanced in. Upon the floor lay his rickshaw coolie, Ho, his head twisted at a grotesque angle. Hugh's lips tightened, and his thumb flipped down the safety catch of his pistol.

"Get out of the way," he ordered.

The man smiled and took a knife from his sash, his yellow face leering.

Hugh did not hesitate. With a flick he reversed the end of his pistol, and its butt crashed down between the man's narrow eyes. Half-stunned and blinded, the Chinese staggered, groping for the wall.

Hugh hurled himself at the men who had gathered behind the half-open door. The impetuous fury of his attack surprised them, and they retreated a step. The pistol butt descended again, and a second native dropped. The others dodged into the room where Ho's limp body lay. The American slammed the door after them and threw a bolt that locked it.

Then he dashed along the passageway and raced up the stairs. His pistol was still in his hand, and the head waiter fled in panic.

Soon Hugh was back in the private dining room he had left less than ten minutes before. Count Uchida, Dagmar and Baron von Schlechtweg were still seated around the table.

"Where's Miss Barrow?" Hugh demanded.

Expressions of surprise appeared upon the three faces that looked up at him.

"My good fellow, what's the matter?" Count Uchida asked. "Your pistol—this—"

"Let that go. Where's Miss Barrow?"

"She called a rickshaw and left," Dagmar explained. "She said she suddenly remembered—"

"That's a lie! Where is she?"

"I say, my friend, this is a bit thick," said Baron von Schlechtweg. "You are called away and the American young lady goes on her own account. You become insulting."

"I'll do worse than that if she's not found," Hugh threatened.

"I ver' sorry for you," Uchida spoke softly. "Perhaps it would be better to call police."

"That's just what we'll do," Allison retorted.

But there was no help to be gotten from them. Neither the Siekhs nor the British detectives that arrived from headquarters could find any trace of Betty Barrow. Ho's death was attributed to a Chinese tong war, and neither Hugh Allison nor the British Secret Service could find one clue that would connect Uchida, Dagmar or the baron with the girl's disappearance.

A dozen witnesses had seen her ride away in a rickshaw—yet all trace of her was lost within two blocks of the Door to a Thousand Delights.

BETTY BARROW was led into a windowless room whose furnishings were the height of Oriental luxury. Silks, teak, jade and alabaster reflected the light of candles whose wax had been dyed a brilliant red. Collections of ancient Chinese armor decorated the walls.

The girl's arms were bound, and grim-faced native women walked on either side of her. As the silken curtains parted, she saw Dagmar Marsen bending over a small cabinet on the opposite side of the room. She was speaking in low, carefully enunciated sentences. As Betty entered, she hastily snapped a switch and turned to face her prisoner.

The bare-armed native woman bound Betty in a teakwood chair standing against the wall. Then they bowed silently and retired through the silken curtains. "Am I supposed to thank you for this?" The American girl looked down at her bonds.

Dagmar lighted a cigarette. "I'm sorry to put you to all this inconvenience," she said, "but all is fair, you know."

"Love or war?"

"Both, perhaps." The woman smiled. She mixed herself a whisky and soda.

"Sorry I can't invite you to join me," she said, "until after you've talked to a friend of ours."

Betty looked around. She could see no sign of a telephone in this secret hiding place. Then her eyes rested on the cabinet into which Dagmar had been talking. So that was it—a radio! Her glance flashed on, to appraise the quaint armor that hung upon the wall—ancient bows, arrows and lances of a day long-gone.

"You mean Hugh?" she asked.

Dagmar nodded. "Yes. I'd like to get some information from him — a little technical detail that another friend of mine wants to learn."

"About fleets, I suppose," Betty retorted.

Once more the woman nodded.

"You've come to the wrong port," the girl answered. "An admiral's daughter knows enough to keep her mouth shut."

A crooked smile twisted Dagmar's full lips.

"An admiral's daughter is not above stealing letters," she retorted.

Betty ignored the remark. "In any case," she said, "you've come to the wrong person."

"I don't think so. As soon as we get in touch with Hugh Allison, you are to ask him about the nets guarding the *New Mexico* and the *Saratoga*. That's all."

"Or else?" the girl asked.

"But you will, my dear," Dagmar smiled cruelly. "Think it over. I'll be back in a moment."

Dagmar went out through the silken curtains, and Betty Barrow was alone. She glanced around again. On the other side of the room was the radio cabinet—a sending set, the girl knew, by the huge tubes beneath the box containing the microphone. Dagmar had been using it when Betty entered the room. They were trying to get in touch with Allison, probably. If she could only get that set in operation! Dagmar had pressed a button on the right.

Betty struggled with her bonds, but could not loosen them. Her legs were thonged to the chair, and her arms were tied from the elbows up. She looked around. There was no hope of getting to the radio switch. If she only had something that would reach that far.

She twisted and squirmed in her chair, a stiff-backed teak of Chinese design. Above her was a collection of Oriental arms. A Manchu lance attracted her attention. It would reach the radio, her eyes told her. Once more she twisted in

her chair, and as she strained, her fingers barely touched the oaken shaft. Now she pressed her imprisoned feet down, and the chair shifted slightly.

Her fingers closed over the lance butt, and she lifted it free from the hooks to which it hung. Then came the slow, painful task of getting it in position. She struggled desperately, her ears straining for the slightest sound that would tell of Dagmar's return. Her heart beat until it almost smothered her, but at last she had the lance where it pressed against the radio-control button. She gave it a vicious punch.

At the sound of doors opening down a corridor, Betty hurriedly pulled the lance back. Raising it cautiously, she replaced it in its hooks and glanced at the radio. The great tubes were concealed and she could not see their glow, but she was sure they would be warmed within a few minutes.

Suddenly the silken curtains parted and Dagmar entered. Behind her were the two Chinese women who had been Betty's jailors. Their muscular arms were bare, their angular faces hard and unfeeling.

"Have you changed your mind?" Dagmar asked.

"I'm not sure," Betty deliberately kept all hostility from her voice. "Courtesies are exchanged, even in love and war."

The woman smiled as she toyed with a small pair of manicure scissors of curi-
out design.

"Meaning just what?"

"You might tell me something first, I think. Am I in the Blue Dragon Grotto?"

"What of that?"

"I merely wanted to know. It's twenty-six miles southwest of Hongkong, isn't it—on the way to Macao?"

Suspicion shone in Dagmar's eyes, and she stepped a little closer. Her gaze was fixed on Betty's girlish face.

"Just what are you trying to do?" the woman demanded.

"Nothing but find out where I am."

"First you'll tell me what I want to know." A sudden fierceness had come into Dagmar's voice.

She made a gesture to the Chinese women and they seized Betty's ankles and tied them to the legs of the chair. Then her arms were fastened at the wrist, and bound to the arms of the teakwood chair.

Dagmar sat down in front of Betty and picked up one of her fingers.

"How long you've let your nails grow," she murmured.

She grasped one finger firmly and raised the strange scissors with which she had been toying a few moments before. The girl watched her with defiant eyes.

"But perhaps you don't wish me to touch them," Dagmar said. "Perhaps you would rather aid us."

"You cannot make me do it," Betty retorted. "You can hold me in the Blue Dragon Grotto as long as you like, but it's not far to Hongkong. You can—"

Dagmar's hand contracted, and the strange scissors bit deep into Betty's nails, driving down into the quick. She attacked another finger, and blood dripped from the tip.

Then Betty Barrow's white lips parted, and her screams echoed through the room.

ALTHOUGH he was unable to find any clue which would connect Uchida, Dagmar or von Schlechtweg with Betty's actual disappearance, Allison finally got a trace of her and learned she had boarded a *sampan* not far from the Door to a Thousand Delights. She was therefore no longer on the island of Hongkong. The search would have to include the mainland, as far as Canton and Macao.

"If they have her in some hideout, they'll be talking about it over the radio," Allison reasoned.

He leaped into a rickshaw and hurried to the Hongkong hotel. A few minutes later, he was examining the recording tape and wax cylinder. Both were blank. A telephone message to the British detective bureau told him that both Army and Navy secret agents were aiding in the search. They were thoroughly familiar with the country, and he could be of little aid.

"But I must do something," he kept muttering to himself, as he paced up and down the floor.

He stopped as he passed the table upon which he had been working on the blinker code. The letter which Dagmar had taken from Count Uchida's pocket was lying there. Hugh's room boy had brought in a pitcher of ice water and placed it on the blank sheet.

But now it was no longer blank. Characters dimly covered what had been an unmarked surface. He hurriedly jotted them down before they could fade again. Then he rubbed the surface with ice, and the letters brightened. The Japanese had discovered a secret ink that reversed the old method of developing writing with heat.

Allison studied the code message. It was undoubtedly Kana. Would it be in diplomatic or Army-Navy code? He had been given an exposition of the Japanese diplomatic cipher when he was in London during the naval conference. A friend in the British Black Chamber had shown him several messages that had been intercepted by the Admiralty, and the man had pointed out how they could be broken. Fortunately, he still had the notes he had taken, so he quickly got them out of their hiding place.

In another moment he was attacking Uchida's message. The last word was checked first. Using the Kana variants which had been employed in London, the last five letters spelled "China."

Uchida, of course! It was the signature! Then Hugh tackled the main part of the message. His eyes widened as the text began to fall apart. When he had finished, he stared in amazement at the result. He read:

"Gross and aids planning destruction American warship. Will blame British. Trying to get details by pretending to work with them but Gross is suspicious. Shall I warn Americans or let plot take its course? Miniature sub may involve Japan unless quick action taken. Advise immediately.

Uchida."

Hugh Allison's face lost its casual calmness. The message had at last shown who was his real enemy. It told him that the Japanese, too, had been spying and keeping in touch with the Gross operatives. And the Jap, in turn, had been spied upon. He must get in touch with him before it is too late.

On his way out, he paused to glance at his radio receiving set. The wax cylinder was turning rapidly. It was controlled automatically so that it did not run unless messages were coming through the air at the wave length Allison had discovered was used by Dagmar and von Schlechtweg.

Suddenly the cylinder stopped. He slipped it off its support and put on a

fresh one. Then he took the record and attached it to his dictaphone. Clamping on the head piece, he started the cylinder revolving again.

There was only a quiet buzzing, and his eyes showed their disappointment. But suddenly he stiffened in his chair. Words came that he recognized as Dagmar's. And Betty Barrow's voice was answering. He gripped himself and listened.

"You might tell me something first," he heard the girl say. "Am I in the Blue Dragon Grotto?"

There was a pause, and Dagmar said something he could not catch. Then, twenty-six miles southwest of Hongkong, isn't it, on the way to Macao?" he heard Betty say clearly, and he leaped from his chair.

The cylinder kept turning. Dagmar's voice sounded again, and this time it was grim and threatening. Betty Barrow was defying her. The cylinder ended with a scream.

The young man threw off the headphones and snatched up the second cylinder. He heard more threats from Dagmar, whose voice was sharp as a poniard. "Within an hour your father will be dead. We're starting now. Get us the information we want, and we'll spare his ship. If you don't—"

"I refuse to do it," he heard Betty cry.

Hugh Allison could wait no longer. Throwing on his radio direction-finder, he took a bearing and marked it on the map of the Hongkong sector. Then he dashed for the door. As he reached the hall, he ran into Carlton Chumleigh, the British Secret Service ace.

"I'm sorry," Hugh blurted out, "but—"

"I say, old chap," the Englishman began, "is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yes. Hunt up Baron von Schlechtweg, put him under arrest and *incommunicado*."

"How about that Japanese chap—Uchida?"

"He's all right; in fact, he's working along the same lines as we are. Just don't lose von Schlechtweg." And he dashed downstairs. . . .

Fifteen minutes later, Allison raced up the iron ladder that led to the flying deck of the airplane carrier *Ranger*. A three-place amphibian was on the starting line, its engine bellowing. Hugh slipped on helmet and goggles and clam-

bered into the rear compartment. The flying boat took to the air.

Allison set up his portable direction-finder and put on the headphones. He tuned in on the wave-length that had brought Betty's voice to him. The girl's cries were growing dimmer. At last they ceased. Only a slight humming noise that told of radio activity guided the speeding amphibian.

Then he stiffened in his seat. A new voice came through the air, harsh and guttural.

"I am getting under way, Dagmar. You must come with me."

"I'm going to stay here, Eric. I'm going to make this girl do what I say—or kill her." Dagmar's voice replied, harshly.

Eric Gross, the shadowy figure behind the sinister drama, was at last on the scene. He was urging his accomplice to go with him. Hugh Allison felt for the automatic pistol he carried beneath his left arm.

"Better come, Dagmar," the man urged. "She is about gone now."

"Then I'll revive her," the woman answered.

"Don't argue with me." The man's voice had turned brusque. "The Squid is ready. Come, we will make history, *and* then—I will take you to Berlin with me."

"I'm staying here," Dagmar insisted. "No little admiral's daughter can beat me at my own game."

There was a burst of guttural laughter, then silence.

As the plane raced toward the caves Betty had called the Blue Dragon Grotto, Allison appraised the amphibian's armament. The bombs beneath the center cockpit would destroy the submarine, if he could find it.

"There is the Blue Dragon Grotto, lieutenant." The amphibian's pilot finally pointed to an opening in the rocky cliffs, whose base was lapped by the ocean.

Allison clapped his glasses to his eyes. Just inside the cavern's mouth he saw a small boat secured to a ring bolt.

"Come down there and then stand by," he ordered.

"Aye, aye, sir."

The amphibian descended and glided up to the mouth of the cavern. Climbing out on the lower wing, he stepped ashore, hurried to the boat and took up the oars.

"If you see a U-boat come out of here,

bomb it," he told the man in the second cockpit.

"But suppose—"

"I'm supposing it's necessary. I'll take the blame."

"Aye, aye, sir."

HUGH ALLISON cut the boat loose and started for the cave. The light faded rapidly as he penetrated the rocky depths. The tide was running in, and he realized by its speed that an underground lake or bay of some size was ahead of him. At last he glimpsed a faint light ahead, and he eased the boat over until it was in the shadows.

The narrow stream he had been following emptied into a lake fully half a mile across. On the right was a stone pier, to which several boats were moored. Allison peered through the half-light for some sign of a miniature submarine among them, but all the vessels were of *sampan* type.

Hugh's eyes narrowed when he saw these boats. Now he knew how Betty Barrow had reached the Blue Dragon Grotto. He himself did not dare tie up to the pier—he would be challenged before he could set foot ashore—so he glided up to a rocky point that marked one corner of a stone building. In another moment, he was on land again, his pistol in hand.

He dashed by a projecting ledge and stopped suddenly. Something dark and snakelike had shot through the air and wrapped itself around his right wrist. He felt a twisting jerk, and his pistol was snatched from his hand.

The strangler again—the man who had murdered Conrow and had tried to kill him. The silken scarf was shooting through the air once more as Allison lunged forward and grappled with the man. The Thug was large-boned and sinewy, a man who from childhood had made a profession of murder.

The Thug's hand shot up, and his brown fingers grasped Hugh's throat, but a driving blow into the man's lean ribs made him relax his hold. There was a crashing fall, and they both rolled and twisted on the grotto's rocky floor. The Thug had reached into his sash, and a knife appeared.

Allison's left shot out to grasp his adversary's wrist, but in spite of his ef-

forts, the knife descended slowly. Again he rolled and twisted.

There was a groan from the Thug—the first sound he had made—and a tinkle as the knife fell to the floor.

Allison fastened one hand upon the Thug's outjutting shin. The other hand grasped the long hair at the back of his neck. He gave a swift, powerful jerk, and the Thug's head went around. Allison heard a bone snap and the Thug fell backward, limp and lifeless.

"That's what you did to Conrow with your cloth. I used my hands." Hugh growled, getting to his feet.

Allison picked up his pistol and went toward the house that stood at the edge of the underground lake. Lights were burning inside. He pushed the door open and peered in. Seeing no one, he entered quietly. As he heard a low moan from the interior, he quickened his step, through one room and into the next.

Then he sprang forward. A girl's limp figure was bound to a chair.

"Betty!" he called, as he darted toward her.

Her eyes went wide with fright as she looked in his direction.

"Hugh—Hugh!" she cried. "I'm—"

A shot crashed out, and a bullet tore a ribbon of leather from Allison's flying helmet.

Hugh looked up to see a powerful Chinese level his revolver for a second shot. Beside the man was Dagmar Marsen—and behind the two were three tong men.

HUGH ALLISON'S hand jerked as his pistol fired. The huge Chinese spun crazily, and plunged into the room, to sprawl at the American's feet.

Allison dodged down to pick up the revolver the Chinese had dropped. Now he had two weapons with which to stand off his enemies.

One gun flamed, then another. Hugh saw Dagmar snatch a pistol from a yellow hand and raise it. He fired, and the bullet tore the weapon from her grasp. He flung another blast into the yellow ranks, and the men threw up their hands.

"Why don't you shoot me!" Dagmar said, her dark eyes flashing hate.

"I'm saving you for the British," he told her.

He turned to cut Betty's bonds, keeping one weapon leveled on his prisoners.

"The Squid?" he asked.

The girl winced and shook her head.

A dry laugh came from Dagmar's distorted lips. "It's on its way. You can trust Eric to get out of this. I should have gone with him."

"You'll follow him, soon enough," Allison said dryly.

He barked orders in stilted Chinese, and the women who had acted as Betty's jailors carried her out of the house and onto a large, four-oared *sampan* that was tied up to the pier. Hugh herded his other prisoners after her, and assigned the largest tong men to work the sweeps.

"No go—*fy tee*," he commanded, covering the oarsmen with his weapons.

Dagmar was in the little shelter amidship with Betty, and he kept one pistol pointed in her direction.

Within a few minutes, they saw the first gray of outside light, and soon they sighted the amphibian. At Allison's direction, the men rowed alongside. Then Hugh beckoned to the junior lieutenant, who occupied the bomber's cockpit.

"Come down here and take over," he called. "I have a job to finish."

The man slid from the pit and took his place on the after-deck.

"Watch those two women," Allison ordered.

The bomber glanced into the shelter where Betty Barrow was lying. "There's only one there, sir," he said.

"Only one?"

Hugh Allison leaped forward and stared into the shadowed house.

Dagmar was gone!

He glanced at the water on either side of the *sampan*, and caught a glimpse of a gray shape speeding through the blue depths. At first he believed it was the submarine, and thought that Dagmar, in some strange fashion, had dived down and entered it. Then he saw it was a shark. He shuddered. In spite of what the woman had done, death at the hands of those corsairs of the deep was a thing he would not want his worst enemy to suffer.

"She won't get very far with that fellow around," the bomber muttered, pointing to the shark.

Allison nodded. "You'd better get going," he said.

He clambered onto a pontoon, and the *sampan* shoved off. The amphibian soon took to the air, scouting in circles, while Allison peered down into the ocean depths for the first sign of the Squid. This was

his last chance to avert disaster. Somewhere beneath those idly lapping waves was the most ruthless submarine commander of the Kaiser's navy.

Eric Gross had plotted deeply. His craft was of British type, but it had been shipped from Japan. His bombs were doubtless of English origin. Their fragments would probably show the name of Vickers, or, if not, Mitsubishi's imprint would be upon them. Both Great Britain and Japan would be involved—disastrously—and a German exile would be the sole cause of the inevitable war.

The amphibian soared upward, winging in wide circles. Then Allison caught sight of a gray shape moving through the water at a great speed.

"There it is," Hugh yelled to the pilot.

The amphibian nosed toward the surface.

"A little more to the right," he called.

The amphibian swerved. Once more Hugh peered through his sights. His hand was on the lever, ready to launch his first projectile.

"Let go that lever, straighten up and face forward," a voice shrilled in his ear.

Hugh Allison felt the hard point of an automatic pistol thrust against his back.

HUGH did not need to look behind him. He recognized Dagmar's voice. She must have slipped into the water when the *sampan* drew alongside the airplane and crawled into the rear cubby.

"Now tell that pilot to turn around and fly for Macao," she ordered.

The American knew that Dagmar would not hesitate to kill. Her own life was menaced. Back in her native Macao, she could escape, but once in Hongkong, she would face a court martial as a spy.

"Now's your chance," the pilot yelled, bringing the amphibian into position to strike. He did not yet know what had happened.

"Do that and you die," Dagmar threatened.

The bellowing of the engine kept the pilot from hearing her, but the words rang in Allison's ears.

He stared ahead. The fleets swung at anchor, and the Squid was speeding toward them beneath the surface.

"What's the matter?" the pilot yelled. Allison did not answer. He was looking down at the bomb release, and he saw a small foot on either side of the levers.

The two after-cockpits were close together. The radio operator, who usually occupied the third, was forced to straddle the bomb mechanism in order to find room for his feet in that compactly built craft.

Hugh's hands gradually reached down.

But the Squid was nearing the fleet. They could not wait long.

"Now tell him to line for Macao," the woman called into Hugh's ear.

"Which way?" he yelled at her.

"Southwest—over that way." Dagmar instinctively pointed with the hand which held the pistol.

At the same instant Allison's hands gripped her ankles. A forward jerk pulled her down in her seat. There was a sharp report as her weapon went off in mid-air. Hugh twisted, releasing his hold on her ankles. He gave a wrench, and her pistol was tossed overboard.

The woman clawed and bit him, but he soon bound her hands and legs with lengths of radio antenna line, and in another moment she was helpless. Then he turned to the bomb levers again. His hand snapped the release.

A bomb tumbled, then straightened when the vanes caught the air.

A geyser of spume sprang into the air, but Hugh could see that the submarine was uninjured.

"I'll get it next time," he yelled at the pilot. "Circle again."

But when the amphibian had swung back into position, Hugh could not sight the U-boat. The water below was inky.

"Keep circling that dark spot," he bellowed to the pilot.

The man nodded, and more bombs dropped, but no tell-tale splotches of oil appeared.

"You can't get him," Dagmar jeered.

Hugh cut his aerial telephone set and started calling into the transmitter.

"Submarine Squid ahoy!"

There was no answer, but he soon caught a buzz of radio activity. He worked his direction-finder. It pointed almost exactly below them.

"Hello, Gross," Hugh called. "This is Allison, U. S. Navy, Intelligence Corps. Surrender and you'll get a fair trial."

"I see you first in hell. Dot's all," a guttural voice answered.

The voice was a perfect guide. The amphibian's pilot twisted in his seat and followed Hugh's pantomimed directions.

The amphibian circled and swung over the dark water where the Squid was hiding. The magic of radio had penetrated its lair.

Hugh peered through the sights, then snapped back the bomb release. There was the crash of a bursting bomb, and a geyser leaped into the air. The amphibian circled as the surface of the sea boiled tempestuously. Then it calmed. A pool of oil was forming on its surface.

A few minutes later, the amphibian landed at the British tender docks, instead of going to the *Ranger*. Allison had telephoned from the air to the British Secret Service headquarters and Carlton Chumleigh was at the wharf.

"She's in the rear cockpit," the American told the Britisher. "It's up to you to handle the case."

Chumleigh nodded. "It will be rather a pleasure."

HONGKONG'S glittering lights soared up to meet the stars as Betty Barrow and Hugh Allison sat on the broad balcony opening off the admiral's suite. The fleet's commander-in-chief sat to one side.

"Count Uchida had me fooled at first," Hugh was saying. "He was really doing a little spying himself. The miniature sub was built ostensibly for pearl diving, but the Japanese had suspected Gross of planning to use it for another purpose."

The admiral nodded.

"Of course, Baron von Schlechtweg's confession to the British clears up everything," Allison went on. "Gross had the Ying Lee working for him under the promise that Hongkong would be free from British domination. And so they let him keep the Squid in the Grotto."

"They got me there under the pretense that they were taking me to you," Betty broke in, her eyes on Hugh.

Sounds of music floated to them from the great ballroom below.

Hugh Allison looked at the glittering lights of the city, and at the stars which seemed to merge with them in a tapestry of beauty. "Up there toward the peak," he murmured to Betty, "you can't tell which is a star and which is a light."

"They are beautiful," she said.

"Yes, they're beautiful—now," he replied. "I once looked at them with Dagmar Marsen—but that seems like a long time ago. They mean more—with you."

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Diamond Dynamite



By John Gregory

BASEBALL was more than a national pastime in the little town of Mystic. It was a fever. The horsehide germs crept into the blood of the populace around the second week in June and the temperatures of the fans did not drop below one hundred and four until the leaves began to fall.

Business in the little manufacturing town—hats were the chief product—

practically ran itself the day the Lynfield Millers were scheduled to play the local team. The games in the semi-pro league of the southern part of the state were played at twilight, starting at five-thirty, and the majority of fans headed straight for the ball park when work was done. Dinner in Mystic was a haphazard affair on Friday nights.

The whistle at the Mystic hat factory

screamed at five o'clock. Dib Trueman timekeeper, in his little cubicle near the shipping room, ripped off his work coat and hung it on a nail. He straightened out his desk hurriedly and went into the washroom. There he donned the uniform of the Mystic Hatters and crammed his other clothes into a battered suitcase.

Carrying his spiked shoes in his hand he hurried out of the factory and ran toward the main gate. There would be a long yellow roadster waiting for him and a dark eyed, curly-headed fellow would be sitting in the driver's seat.

Dib grinned when he sighted the car. Some one was with Tom Linton. He knew that little red hat and the golden curls that peeked out from under it. Dib had known Sue Linton ever since he was able to venture around on two chubby legs. In those days Sue's father had not been the owner of the Mystic hat factory.

Tom called out: "Shake a leg, Dib! We've got to have time to limber up a little."

Trueman threw his shoes into the rumble seat and crowded into the front seat with Tom and his sister.

Sue said: "Hello," and lighted a cigarette. Dib frowned when the smoke skirled across his face. His aunt had spoken of Sue only that morning. She had remarked that Sue Linton had changed a lot since being away to boarding school. But Dib never could change his mind about the girl.

Tom Linton interrupted that train of thought with: "You want to watch that guy who's pitching for Lynfield, Dib. They certainly named him right—Duster. He nearly got Bill Robbins last time we played. He's a dirty player—that Varney. He blazes a couple in close to drive you away—then—"

"You really aren't afraid of Duster Varney, are you, Tom?" Sue cut in, flipping her cigarette away. "He's really an awfully nice person. I met him the other night. There's nothing terrible looking about him—in fact he's handsome and he's a marvelous dancer."

"I don't like him," Tom Linton snapped. "I've heard things about him. He got kicked out of college—"

"The trouble with you and Dib is," Sue clipped, "that you're both afraid of anybody who has been anywhere and done things. You're content to stay in Mystic all your lives and—grow moss on your backs."

TOM LINTON jammed on the brakes angrily. The girl got out of the car and started toward the rickety stands that flanked one side of the diamond.

The stands filled rapidly and the crowd kept up a continual clamor. They rose in unison and unleashed a great roar of acclamation when the Mystic Hatters took the field.

A wild yell came from the visitors' supporters when the first man up cracked the Mystic southpaw's delivery for a single. The next batter struck out on three pitched balls. Lefty Smith worked hard on the next Lynfield swatter and got himself into a three and two hole. He had to feed the visitor a good ball. The bat met it squarely, drove it toward deep short. It was a wicked smash, labeled two bases.

Dib Trueman came over fast, stabbed it with his gloved hand and threw while off balance to Tom Linton. The second sacker snagged it, whirled and rifled it to first. The sacks were empty.

The crowd stamped the boards and screeched their lungs sore while the teams were changing places. Duster Varney met Linton and Trueman on his way to the mound. His lips curled.

"Pretty lucky, guys! What would you bet on your chances in this game?"

"Who asked you to sound off, Varney?" Linton cracked. "Watch that dusting-off stuff or I'll break a bat over your skull."

Varney laughed derisively and said no more.

Tim Robbins, Mystic lead-off man, walked to the plate and faced the tall righthander who had joined the Lynfield Millers several weeks after the start of the season. Robbins was nervous. He stepped back from the plate when the first fireball streaked over. The sweeping curve cut the outside corner for a strike. Duster Varney laughed and the local player set his jaws and crowded the plate.

A scorcher nearly hit him and he flattened into the dust around the plate. Robbins got up and yelled something to the pitcher. The local fans boomed until the inner was over. Tom Linton came back from taking three cuts at thin air and flung his bat to the dirt.

"He nearly cracked me with two of those pitches. The sucker can put 'em where he wants 'em. Some day he'll get one too perfect."

In the seventh, with the Lynfield Millers leading six to one, Duster Varney sent Dib Trueman to the dirt with a fireball that came zipping straight for his head. The shortstop dropped his bat and walked to the pitcher's box.

"You did that deliberately," Dib said evenly. "I'm warning you, Varney! One more like that and I'll knock your teeth out!"

"Get back an' hit it! I'll toss it under-

hand to you, Trueman," Duster sneered. "Maybe I'm out of my class here."

The crowd yelled their disapproval while Dib took two strikes. The short-stop laced Duster Varney's next shot to center for a double. On his way to first he yelled, "Sure, you're out of your class!"

The Lynfield twirler, ruffed at the crowd's derisive clamor, hit the next Mystic batsman on the shoulder. The man went to first and Tom Linton came up. Three times he stepped back when Varney sliced them in close to the letters on his uniform. The next pitch was low and outside. The bases were filled.

From third base Dib yelled: "Hit the next guy, Varney! Then only one run will score."

DUSTER seemed on the point of tossing away his glove and heading for his tormentor. A leonine roar from the Lynfield manager changed his mind. Raging, he drilled one down the alley to the Mystic clean-up man. The crack of the bat could be heard in the next township. Three runs came in and the winning tallies were still on the bags. The manager came off the Lynfield bench and waved Duster Varney in. The pitcher skimmed his glove high into the air and headed for the Mystic bench.

"It's us he's after, Dib," Tom Linton cracked. "Come on—"

The crowd came down onto the field when the players of both sides started a free-for-all. Duster Varney drove a fist at Trueman and went staggering when Tom Linton connected with his chin. The umpire ran all over the place threatening the Lynfield players if they did not go back to their bench.

The visitors' manager tried to make himself heard. The police came in finally and broke it up but the game was forfeited to the Mystic players 9-0 when the Lynfield team refused to go on unless Trueman and Linton were thrown out of the game.

On the way home Sue Linton was furious. The pleased grins on the faces of the men who sat on either side of her made the girl's blood boil. . . .

Tom Linton picked Dib up later that night. The two rode far out into the country and talked for a while about commonplace things.

On the way back to Mystic, Tom Linton swung off the road into a filing station. The sound of a shot cracked the night air a moment later and a black, closed car tore out from in front of the gas tanks. A bullet crashed into the hood of the roadster and Tom jammed the brakes fast.

"Duck, Dib!" he yelled. "Must be a holdup!"

When the two had gathered their wits they got out of the car and ran to the little house that nestled in the shadows of big pine trees. The door was ajar but the lights were out.

They heard a groan in one corner of the place and Dib fumbled for a light switch. He found it at last and flooded the place with light. A man sat on the floor, evidently recovering from insensibility, holding greasy fingers to a red blotch on his arm.

"Stuck me up—three guys," he said between gasps. "Rifed the cash drawer. Must've got about a hundred bucks. I guess it must be the same gang that's been—say, call a doc for me, will you, fellers?"

"You bet," Tom said and leaped to the 'phone. "Did you get a look at any of 'em?" he asked while waiting for the number.

"No—I didn't get a chance. A guy come in when my back was turned an' switched out the lights. I heard a car drive in when I tried to get to a gun. Then I got plugged."

"Funny that anybody should know where the switch was right away," remarked Dib thoughtfully.

Tom Linton nodded.

"Just my luck to get stuck up tonight," the attendant sighed. "All them cars from Lynfield stopped here an' gassed up after the game. Never have more than twenty bucks any other time."

Tom Linton stooped and picked up something that had caught his eye. He crammed it into his pocket.

An hour later the ball players drove into Mystic. "Let's have a soda, Dib," proposed Tom. He had not spoken all the way in from the scene of the holdup. Dib had wondered at the whiteness around his friend's lips. After all holdups happened every day. Before he could agree to Tom's suggestion verbally Dib felt his pal's quick grasp on his arm. Across the street was a beer tavern. A car had pulled up and two people were getting out. Dib knew instantly that the girl was Sue. The man with her wore a light topcoat and a derby. He was tall—broadshouldered.

"Come on," said Tom. "That's Duster Varney. What's got into that fool kid? Almost eleven o'clock and out with that—I thought he'd gone to Lynfield. Don't you get mixed up in this, Dib. Let me do the talking."

The tavern was crowded. Dib Trueman felt peculiar about going in. His knees shook a little when he followed Tom Linton to a booth across the bar. Duster

Varney's eyes glittered when he saw the ball players. The girl's eyes widened and her cheeks flushed a little. But there was a defiant set to her lips when her brother addressed her.

"Sue—you go on home," were his terse words.

"Look here, Tom—what do you mean, following me like this? I'll stay if I want!" But she was wriggling into her coat as she spoke. The staring eyes of the habitués of the place caused her cheeks to flame.

"Dib, will you see Sue home?" Tom asked of his friend. At that Duster Varney got up, fists clenched.

"Sure, Tom—"

"I'll go home alone," Sue Linton snapped. "Take your hand off my arm." She stalked out, fighting a flood of tears. Dib Trueman followed her.

"Sue, please. It's pretty dark along the streets. Let me—"

"Don't ever speak to me again," the girl almost sobbed. "You—you lout!"

DIB stiffened, set his lips and went back into the tavern. In the doorway he stopped. Duster Varney, face white, eyes smoky, was following Tom Linton out of the place.

"Wait here," Tom said to Dib. "Varney and I are going to have a little chat in private." The two men went into a little alley near the tavern. Dib Trueman followed part way and hugged the side of the brick building. He could hear Tom's steady voice.

"I'm giving you a break, Duster. Because I don't want my sister mixed up in any rotten mess. But see her again and you'll regret it. That's all I have to say. Get that?"

"I get it, Linton," Varney's voice rasped, "and you get this. No punk like you can cross me the way you have. Look out that you don't get your skull smashed in. Maybe I'll see her again and maybe I won't, Linton. I'm kind of stuck on her."

"You rat!" Dib heard Tom Linton grind out. "I'm not afraid of your threats. I thought you were a louse when I first saw you. Duster, huh? Ever dust anybody off without a baseball?"

A silence followed. Then, "Okay, Linton. You're askin' for it."

"Don't forget what I've got, Varney," Tom clipped.

"Sure—and I got the other. So what? I get rid of it. Anyway it don't prove a thing."

"You might have a tough time answering questions, though," Tom retorted. "That's all, Duster. You keep away from my sister. I guess you will, all right."

"Sure I will," the Lynfield pitcher's

voice ripped out, "and you keep away from the plate the next time I pitch to you, Linton!"

Boots crunched against gravel then and Dib Trueman ducked back into the tavern entrance. He saw Duster Varney get into a small car at the curb. In the light from the street lamps the man's shoe-button eyes were gleaming with suppressed rage. He saw Tom Linton standing at the corner of the alley watching Varney until the Lynfield man drove away.

"I guess he'll keep away from Sue," Tom said when he came over to Dib.

"What did you say to him? You find out something?"

"Maybe," replied Tom. "But I'm keeping you out of it, Dib. Sue won't be able to blame you for anything I've done. I just had an idea he was a slippery guy, that's all. I kind of bluffed him, I guess. I always wondered how he could dress like Clark Gable on thirty a week. That's what the Lynfield Mill pays him for adding up figures. No guy who is any good makes a date with a girl this time of night. I think Sue knows she went too far this time. The old man'll tell her plenty if he hears about it. Well, I'll drive you home, fellow. Let's go."

A week later the Mystic team journeyed to Lynfield to play a league game. For some strange reason Dib Trueman wished that Sue had not come. She sat so close to him in the car that he could breathe the perfume of her hair. Ever since the night of the tavern incident the girl had harbored a rebellious light in her eyes. She had been barely civil.

When they drew near Lynfield, a gnawing sensation of foreboding manifested itself to Dib. It was something that he could not explain, but it had been with him for days. He found himself actually praying for rain although there was hardly a cloud in the late afternoon sky.

The fans came out ten thousand strong. They knew it was a grudge battle. No one forgot the raw deal the Millers had been given in Mystic. A derisive shout showered down upon the visitors when they appeared on the field. One contingent of fans hurled vegetables to the playing field.

Tom Linton said, "We're in for it, Dib."

"Yeah—look out, won't you, Tom?"

"Sure. Say, what's eating you, Dib? You look sick. Don't let this bunch scare you."

DUSTER VARNEY, face grimly set, rifled a pitch at the first batter and drew a perfect strike. Tim Robbins sucked in his breath and crowded the

plate. The next offering came in wide of the saucer and the Mystic slugger wondered why Varney had not tried to dust him off. He swung at the next pitch and lined to the Millers' first sacker. Duster Varney got the next two men on strikes.

Going in to the bench at the end of the fifth inning, Tom Linton expressed his opinion to Dib Trueman. "He knows what happened last time, I guess. Varney doesn't want to lose any more games like that one. He knows he can't get away with dusting guys off forever."

Dib wasn't so sure. "I don't know—there's something fluky about it, Tom. He never pitched a game so clean as this one before. Watch him close when you go up."

"He's got a five-run lead," the Mystic manager said to Tom Linton when the second sacker picked up his bat. "He might let down. Take a cut at the first pitch."

Dib Trueman crouched near the bench when Tom walked up to the plate. He gripped a bat until his knuckles seemed to strain the skin of his hands. His scalp crawled when he looked at Duster Varney.

The Lynfield Millers' pitcher eyed Tom stonily for several moments. He wound up and rifled one down the alley. Tom swung clean around and missed. Varney laughed nastily and a mocking roar came from the Lynfield stands.

Again Duster looked the batter over. He blazed one over the outside corner and the Mystic swatter cut at it too late. At the catcher's signal Varney shook his head and walked off the mound. He rubbed the ball on the front of his shirt, dried his hands and then stepped to the hill again.

Dib Trueman felt the urge to yell, "Look out, Tom! Get away from there—" A sixth sense tortured him, an uncanny intuition that whispered disaster. But he remained crouched where he was, tongue glued to his palate, his hands cold and clammy.

SLOWLY Duster Varney wound up. His lithe body seemed to crack like a whip when he drilled the ball toward the plate. Tom Linton tried to dive under it—too late. The pitcher had been lightning fast. The ball hooked downward and struck him over the temple. The impact of leather against bone was sickening. The ball caromed skyward and Tom Linton fell in a heap at the plate. The Lynfield catcher whipped off his mask and dove for Tom.

Dib Trueman, heart frozen, stumbled across the diamond. In his ears he could still hear the frantic scream of Sue Linton. Over the stands a deathly silence fell.

Both teams crowded around the stricken player. A doctor came running out of the stands. Dib knelt beside his friend and tugged at his sleeve.

"Tom—Tom—speak up—it's me, Dib. Dib—can you hear, Tom?"

Players pulled him away. "Give him a chance to breathe," a choking voice said. "Let the doc in there."

In a daze, fear gripping him in a vise, Dib Trueman clambered to his feet and stood staring at the white faces around him. His eyes became riveted to one—one with shoe-button eyes. He leaped at Duster Varney like a wildcat.

"You did that deliberately, you louse! You let him have it. I heard you threaten him that night." He struck Varney on the mouth and the Lynfield players had to drag him away. They threw him to the ground where he lay sobbing for a while. He scrambled to his feet when he heard some one call out.

"Somebody get him into a car—we've got to get him to a hospital! He's badly injured."

Dib saw Sue Linton kneeling beside the inert figure of her brother. The girl was crying hysterically. Duster Varney was standing nearby, choking out words.

"I didn't—mean it, Sue," he stammered. "It was an accident. Please believe—" He reached down to lift the girl to her feet. Dib Trueman saw red then. He lunged at the man, shoved him away from her.

"Don't touch her! Keep your filthy hands off her. Sue—Sue—it's Dib. I'll take you along to the hospital. He's just knocked out. He'll come out all right."

The girl let Dib help her to the car. She clung to him as they walked across the diamond. Dib winced at her words.

"He didn't do it on p-purpose—nobody would do that—don't blame him, please Dib."

The man clamped his teeth shut and assisted the girl into her car. Outside the Lynfield ball park he could hear a police siren clearing a path for the automobile that carried Tom Linton. As much as he tried, Dib could not drive the consuming fear from his heart. Already a sense of loss was rending his soul. Somehow he knew that Tom would never speak again. He forced himself to calmness when Sue glanced at him for he knew that she was trying to read his thoughts.

"Dib—do you think he's hurt badly? You think he'll—No, no—I won't believe that!" Her head fell against the shoulder of her injured brother's inseparable pal. Sobs convulsed her.

Four hours Dib Trueman and Sue Linton waited in the bleak corridor outside the hospital room. Tom's father stood

with his arm around Mrs. Linton. The mother's sobs pierced Dib's heart. Constantly nurses came and went, their footsteps echoing eerily through the corridors. A few yards from where Dib and Sue sat in common misery, Duster Varney stood, his hands working convulsively, his face white and drawn.

The door of the room opened. A nurse came out. She paused to close the door behind her. Tragedy was written on the young face which she turned on the waiting group. She walked to Tom's father and wordlessly touched the middle-aged man's arm. A second later a doctor came out of the room.

Dib Trueman cried out then. "Please—he—?"

The doctor said: "Quiet, son. You can go in—now."

Tom's mother uttered a strangled cry and almost fell to the floor. Sue ran to her. Andrew Linton seemed to age ten years in the brief time it took for his halting steps to carry him into the grim room.

Tears streamed down Dib Trueman's face unchecked. He did not go into the room with the Lintons who he felt would want to be alone at first. He heard a nurse say softly to another—"There was no chance."

DIB turned slowly and looked at Duster Varney. "You killed him, Varney. Are you going in there to look at your handiwork? If you are, you're a filthier rat even than I thought."

"You think I'm that low?" Varney husked. "Isn't it bad enough that I've done this thing without—you making it worse?"

"Liar!" Dib ground out with a sob. "I heard—you—talking that night. He found out something—you said you'd smash his—"

"Shut up, can't you?" the Lynfield pitcher cried hoarsely. "Just because a man says things when he's—"

"Quiet, please!" the nurse called. "Are you forgetting—?"

It seemed ages before Sue and her parents came out of the room of death. Dib Trueman tiptoed in, then. He went to pieces when he saw the still, white face on the pillow. There was nothing but the little boy in him as he wept unrestrainedly by the bedside of his dead friend since infancy.

Dib had no recollection of being taken home, of being given a sedative. Long hours afterward his brain began to reason sanely. He remembered that night in the filling station. Tom had picked up something. Was that the reason why he had died? Dib was sure that it was, yet

he had no proof. Tom had told Varney that he possessed something which would smash him if he did not keep away from Sue. Perhaps it would be in Tom's room. Dib was resolved to look for it.

Two days later Dib Trueman stood and watched Tom Linton's casket being lowered into the grave. Tears coursed down his cheeks as the green carpet flattened over the coffin. There was a terrible finality about that.

Leaving the cemetery he saw Duster Varney getting into the Linton limousine and he thought of a black spider walking over a bouquet of white roses. The Lintons believed Varney—were sorry for him. Dib could see that. They were forgiving the man who had struck Tom down. But there would come a day. Dib Trueman felt that if that day did not come, he would lose a lot of faith.

A FEW days later Dib went to the Linton home. Sue admitted him. The girl's cheeks were still pinched and white. The lingering odor of funeral flowers assailed Dib's nostrils and he tightened his lips lest they quiver too much.

"I wanted to see Tommy's room," he began. "There are some things he said he always wanted me to have. Could I have them, Sue? Just to have them near me—it would help a bit—"

"Of course, Dib," Tom's sister said quickly. "Go upstairs. You know where his room is. We—we haven't touched it—yet." She turned away and reached for a handkerchief.

Dib slowly climbed the stairs up which he and Tom had bounded so often in companionship. At the door of the familiar room he felt the nearness of his friend. Tommy's possessions seemed to radiate his personality. His pipe—his baseball glove. But Dib had a stronger reason for coming here. He began a diligent search for something that should be here. At last he found it—a pigskin glove, much too large for Tommy Linton.

When Dib went downstairs again, Mrs. Linton was with Sue in the living room. She smiled wanly at this life-long friend of her dead son and held out her hand.

"Dib, I hope you've lost your bitterness to George Varney. Tom wouldn't have wanted you to blame him, you know. He was playing a game. It was an accident. It is hard on us but much harder on the man who struck him."

"Varney did it deliberately," Dib Trueman insisted, and he held out a glove. "Tommy never owned that. He found it somewhere—and I think I know where. I am sure now that I am right. You wouldn't believe me but I hope some day to prove it to you. I loved Tom ever since

I knew enough to love anybody. I heard that man threaten to get him one night." He looked at Sue, then left the house.

One human life is a trivial thing. Life in the town of Mystic went on as before. The howl of baseball fans reached the skies even before the flowers on Tommy Linton's grave had withered. A meeting called to discuss the cancellation of the remaining games on the schedule had ended with the majority deciding that Tommy Linton would not have wanted it so.

"Tom would not have had it that way," a portly trustee said. "He would want us to let things go on as they were before he went away."

But before the meeting broke up a small monument was voted to be placed in the Mystic ball park as a lasting memory of Thomas J. Linton.

At the meeting Dib Trueman got up and said, "I was his best friend. We used to play together in the grove of pines that stood where the center field fence is now. He used to say, 'Dib, I wouldn't mind being buried here.'" Dib paused to gain control of his voice. "It would be the next best thing, wouldn't it, to put the stone near the center field fence by the flagpole? I'd be grateful if you would grant me this request."

Before the game with the Mount Pleasant Tigers a few weeks later the monument was dedicated. It consisted of a small granite slab with Tommy's name on it. The Mayor of Mystic spoke and Sue Linton placed a small wreath of flowers at the base. Dib waited until the crowd had dispersed before he went close and knelt to read the inscription—**IN MEMORY OF THOMAS J. LINTON**

A sportsman—A man.

Dib Trueman was lost without Tommy in the Mystic infield. The team's morale had dropped when Duster Varney mowed the second sacker down. Rumors became current that Duster Varney's pitching days were numbered. His control had gone from bad to worse. He was playing outfield for the Lynfield team and was becoming a terrific hitter. The local paper carried an item to the effect that a Major League scout had been looking him over one day at Dentonville.

The Mystic Hatters rose up and whitewashed the visitors after the ceremonies in center field. After the game Dib went out to the monument and stood looking down at it for a long time.

A WEEK later the Lynfield Millers came in for the last game of the season. The park was packed to overflowing. A big league scout was in town. The local scribe on sports had discovered

him in the lobby of the hotel the night before the game. Mystic's morning paper carried the juicy morsel of news—

"Pop Stark, scout for the Cincy Reds of the National League arrived in Mystic last night. The ivory hunter was evasive but there is little doubt in the writer's mind that he is in our midst to take a look at Duster Varney, christened George, the converted outfielder of the Lynfield Millers. It is no secret that the Reds are looking for young talent that does not carry a price tag marked with five figures. Varney's hitting has been spectacular this season. Always a powerful hitter, he seems to belong in the field. But for that unfortunate accident to Tommy Linton, Varney might still have been laboring in the box without prospect of reaching the big time."

Dib Trueman read that item while eating breakfast. It spoiled his appetite. He crumbled the paper into a ball and slammed it to the floor.

"It isn't right!" he stormed. "There's no justice! Why should a guy like that get the breaks? He's a rat—he killed Tommy—and he has a chance to get up in the world."

All that day Dib labored mechanically, made a dozen mistakes on his time sheets. When the whistle blew, he changed into his uniform and left the factory. Every night his eyes would stray toward the gate where the yellow roadster was wont to stand. Sometimes he actually imagined that Tommy called to him.

Dib got a ride with one of the factory workers to the ball grounds. The place was packed to overflowing and ropes were holding the crowd that milled in center field around Tommy's monument. When Dib saw one of the spectators sitting on the stone he went over and threatened to thrash him.

Sue Linton, watching, felt her heart begin to pound sickeningly. Gibes were hurled at Dib Trueman when he walked back to the Mystic bench. The fans had never forgiven him for his persistent accusations against Duster Varney, who had become something of an idol in the valley.

The big league scout sat behind first base and all eyes were focused on him when Duster Varney stepped up to the plate. There was an ex-big leaguer serving them up for the Hatters. Old Sam Grayson. He and the scout had quite a chat before the game.

Grayson got two strikes on Duster. The Lynfield swatter drove the next one in center for a double and sent a runner in. During the game he made four hits and accepted four chances in the field

without a flaw. The scout nodded with approval when Varney cut off a run at the plate with a fine throw. He made notes on a piece of paper and then called to the Lynfield manager.

That night the story broke. Duster Varney had signed for a tryout with the Cincy Reds in the spring. Five hundred Mystic rooters followed the Millers to Lynfield that night to toast Duster Varney. Dib Trueman found out later that Sue Linton had gone with her father.

"That's the way it goes, Tommy," Dib said in the privacy of his room. "It's darned hard to understand. But I'll prove it some day—prove that he murdered you. I'm getting out of here tomorrow. There's nothing in Mystic without you." He sat down at his desk and drew writing paper from the drawer. A long time he labored over a letter to his dead friend's sister.

At midnight he went out and mailed it. Back in his room again, Dib packed his things. Looking over his bankbook, he found that his balance of close to four hundred dollars lent encouragement to his plan. Part of it to be left for his aunt; the balance to give him a fresh start somewhere.

SUE LINTON received the letter Dib had written her with the next day's afternoon delivery. Her fingers began to tremble when she had read halfway through. She felt as if her heart had shriveled in her chest. The words Dib had written cut her through and through with the sharpness of a knife.

"—and that's why I'm going away. I seem to be so alone without Tommy. Things are — well, all wrong. Varney going to the big leagues. I haven't changed my mind about him, Sue. Some day you will know that I am right. I feel sure of that, Sue. You told me things could never be the same with us if I continued to falsely accuse that man. All right. That's as you would have it. I have no right to tell you what you mean to me—what you've always meant—but I think you know. Tommy did. Perhaps you were right. I'm a lout—a stick. A man who still goes to church on Sundays because he thinks it's the right thing to do. I'm determined to make something of myself. There might be another girl like you somewhere—I'd want to be something for her. Think of me sometimes, Sue. I'll always remember you."

"Dib"

It was then that Sue Linton came to a realization of what was wrong with her world. Without Dib Trueman near her, the world had suddenly become an empty thing. It came to her poignantly that

it had been because of Dib that she had been able to resign herself to the loss of Tommy.

When she went downstairs later in answer to her mother's call, Sue's eyes were red. The man who stood in the family living room seemed a stranger to the girl. She asked herself why she could ever have been drawn to Duster Varney.

"I thought maybe you'd want to wish me luck," the Lynfield player said. "I'm going up north to get toughened up this winter. I want to be ready when I join that big league club."

Sue said dully: "I wish you luck." She knew she lied. It was strange that only now she should see a side of the man that she had never seen before. His small dark eyes repelled her now. Cold tentacles seemed to wind themselves around her heart. When they were alone and Varney tried to take her in his arms possessively, Sue recoiled just as she would have recoiled from the clasp of a vampire.

"Sue—you know how I am about you," the man said. "Maybe we can get married if I make the grade."

"No—I think not—" the girl said huskily. "I'll never marry unless it's a certain person. I know that now. I've been a fool. Please go—George. I don't feel well tonight."

"Sure—anything you say, Sue," Varney said easily, quite undaunted. "Maybe I'll ask you again. Maybe you'll find out you're too good for these two-bit guys."

The girl actually hated him then. For the first time she sensed that Tommy's death had not been an accident. That Dib Trueman had judged the man right. She felt her knees give way and leaned against the door jamb for support.

Varney held out his hand and she forced herself to touch it. Before she could prevent it, the Lynfield player had leaned forward and kissed her on the lips. Anger made her go rigid and the door slammed behind Varney before she could unleash her tongue. She ran upstairs to her room, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

DIB TRUEMAN entered college that fall in a small town five hundred miles away. He could not play baseball there because of his record as a semi-pro. But when summer vacation rolled around, he joined a small circuit in the corn belt and drew twenty-five dollars a game. He found that he would be able to pay his expenses for the next college year in that way.

Between games he worked in a garage where he had managed to get a job. Things seemed bright. Always he thought of Tommy Linton and his heart

ached for Sue. But he did not write to her. He could see no use in that. He had burned that precious bridge behind him—he would go on alone.

Dib followed Duster Varney's big league career in the sporting pages of the daily newspapers. The Lynfield rookie, wrote the scribe of one midwest journal, was proving to be one of the outstanding young players of the season. Varney had displayed Riggs in the Cincy outfield and was banging the ball at a .300 clip. Dib studied the averages and found that Varney had driven in thirty-six runs by mid-season, a fine record for a first year player

It was at the end of a hard game with the House of David team that the manager of the Waterloo Hawks drew Dib Trueman aside.

"Kid, did you see the guy I was talking to on the bench awhile ago? That was a scout from the Cleveland Braves. He wanted to know all about you. Said you have class."

"Yeah? Well, I'm finishing college no matter what happens," declared Dib.

"Sure—I don't blame you, Trueman. But baseball is a business now. You can make good dough for a dozen years. Then you can become a manager—even an owner sometime, maybe. It's no rowdy racket any more. It's a great business. If you get a chance to go up, grab it. They'll tell you in a couple of months whether you're any good or not."

"I'll remember that," said the ex-Mystic player. "I kind of soured on the game after something happened, but—"

It was just a year later that Dib Trueman returned to Mystic. He could stay away no longer. He wanted to tell Sue Linton that he had signed his name to a Cleveland contract. But there was another reason—he had read in the papers of the west that the Cincy Reds were scheduled to play an exhibition game with the Mystic Hatters. He wanted to be there—something drew him, an inexplicable force that he could not fathom.

The night before Dib left Waterloo he had felt Tommy's presence strongly in his room. He had seemed aware of something intangible while he was reading about the Cincy visit to Mystic. Dib had even swung his head around.

During the night he awoke from a dream and found himself sitting up in bed. In the dream he had been talking to Tommy Linton. Tommy had been laughing and pointing to somebody in a crowd whom the whole crowd had been deriding. The face of that somebody had been hazy but Dib knew it to be that of Duster Varney.

Dib arrived in Mystic late at night. He

took a room in the hotel, being loath to waken his aunt at that hour. No sooner had he undressed and donned his pajamas than he heard voices in the adjoining room. One seemed familiar, the one that kept cautioning for silence. The other man's was silky, insistent.

Dib moved softly to the door that was locked between his and the next room and flattened himself against it. He recognized that voice now. It belonged to Duster Varney. Immediately it became clear to Dib that the Reds had put up at the hotel, too. But the man with Varney—

"I'm tellin' ya. I found out that guy in Bensonville croaked. Maybe they'd like to know how—"

"Shut up!" Varney ripped out. "Ain't I been payin' through the nose for a year? I ought to have handed those black-mail letters over to the cops."

"But you wouldn't—naw! Ya think I'm dumb? You're my meal ticket, Duster—"

"Muffle that trap of yours! I'll pay you. But I won't have dough until tomorrow night. After the game. I sent to Cincy for it."

"Sure—you'll have it—at Munger's tavern tomorrow night—eight o'clock. No later. I'm blowin' town."

"I wish you'd croak—"

"Sure, but I got a gat, Duster," the voice slurred. "Don't forget."

"Will you get out of here?"

DIB TRUEMAN did not wait to hear more. He went to his door and opened it softly. When the door of the adjoining room opened, he drew back. He caught a swift glance of Varney's visitor before he went down the stairs. The man wore a plaid topcoat and a brown felt hat.

"Looks like the chickens are coming home to roost, Duster," Dib mouthed with a cold grin. "See you tomorrow."

The minute Dib Trueman showed himself in the lobby of the Mystic House next morning the ubiquitous sport scribe of the local sheet spotted him. He ran over eagerly and shook Dib's hand.

"Glad to see you, Trueman. Heard about you signing up with the Majors. Boy, what luck! They need a shortstop for the game here this afternoon. The guy they've had playing got ptomaine and is laid up. Robbins is managing the Hatters, Dib. He was going to borrow a player from the big leaguers. Get hold of him and say you'll play. Boy, we'll pack that park. Seen it? New stands there now. They can put twelve thousand in the park."

"Play?" Dib muttered. "Sure—why not, Pete? Where can I get hold of Robbins?"



"Call the Linton hat factory—you can get him in the office. He's general manager since Tommy—"

"Sure," Dib cut in, "I'll call him."

The news spread like a brush fire. Dib Trueman back in town—to play for the Mystics. Trueman of the Cleveland club. An old feud renewed. Trueman and Varney. Sue Linton heard the news in a drug-

store and her heart skipped a beat. She swung down from the stool at the fountain and hurried to a telephone booth. But Dib was neither at the hotel nor with his aunt. Sue left the store without paying for her drink and climbed into her roadster.

She rode all over town until she espied a familiar figure swinging out of the gate

at the Linton hat factory. In her eagerness Sue almost ran that figure down. Dib Trueman whirled, opened his mouth to shout a protest. Instead, a small croak issued from his throat at sight of the girl.

"Sue—Sue—" he leaped to the running board and gripped her hand. "You—You don't look a bit different—just as beautiful."

"Dib," the girl replied happily. "I'll never forgive you for running away—for not writing. I've missed you—terribly." She was clutching fiercely at his coat lapel. There was a light in her eyes that Dib had always hoped to see. "I was a fool, Dib! I hope you'll forgive the things I said to you. I—what was it you wanted to tell me—but went away instead?"

Dib looked into the girl's eyes to make sure he had read their story correctly. "I love you—Sue," he said then, softly.

"I want to kiss you, Dib, as a plea for forgiveness," said Sue, leaning toward him. The faithful friend of Tom Linton took his sister into a warm embrace. Tom's greatest wish was fulfilled.

After awhile Sue asked, "Did you come back because Duster Varney was playing here—in Mystic?"

"That was one reason," replied Dib. "Something told me to come. Sue," he went on thoughtfully, "I think something's going to happen. I had the same feeling the day Tommy—"

"I'm a little afraid," confessed the girl. "Be careful, Dib. Please. To lose you now—"

"He's not pitching," Dib said brittlely. "He can't do that again. I can hear the crowd when I walk out onto the field. They've never forgotten about the way I sounded off about Varney. Maybe after today they'll eat their words. Sue—I want you to be at the game—I can't tell you why."

"I believe there is something psychic about you, Dib," his golden-haired sweetheart said softly.

"No—that's foolish, Sue," he denied. "Perhaps where a certain person is concerned—like Tommy, for instance. We were very close—closer than brothers."

AN hour before game time the Mystic ball park was thronged. People were being turned away. Housetops and trees surrounding the field were filled with determined fans. When the Mystic team appeared on the field the crowd's wild acclaim reached a crazy pitch. As it died to a desultory rumble, solo thrusts rolled out at Dib Trueman.

"Hard-boiled guy!"

"Get the gloves—where's Duster Varney?"

"Sorehead!"

"One pitch in close and he'll faint!"

Mystic fans drowned the gibes and gave Dib a great ovation when Robbins introduced him to the spectators. Duster Varney came over to shake hands with Dib but the player turned his back. The man-pack howled when Varney made an uncomplimentary gesture behind Dib's back.

They sensed battle before the day was done. Throughout the stands fans talked of days that had passed. About the beginning of the feud, the accident to Tommy Linton.

During practice Dib turned his head occasionally to look in the direction of the monument erected to Tommy's memory. It seemed to hold a strange significance for him. His eyes remained upon it while the Cincy team went through their paces in practice. The crowd stamped impatiently and the umps looked at their watches.

Finally, they waved the big leaguers in to the bench. The Mystic team trotted out to the diamond amid a plethora of sound. Robbins sent in a young pitcher who had come from the State College to serve them up to the big timers. A garrulous fan howled from the stand back of third.

"Pitch to 'em, Whitey! Maybe you'll get one of their jobs!"

The game was held up while the Lynfield Elks came out and presented Duster Varney with a new traveling bag. Out at short Dib Trueman smiled acidly. A Cincy batboy came out and took the gift to the Redbirds' bench. Duster lifted his cap when he walked away from the plate and the Lynfield contingent raved.

"Come o-o-o-o-o-on! Play ball!"

The ump dusted off the plate and a big leaguer came up waving a large black bat. Whitey Young looked him over and shot a fast one over the heart of the plate. The lead-off man grinned when a strike was called. He hitched at his cap and scowled toward the mound. The college twirler stared him down and then wound up. He slipped another good one across and the local fans roared their approval.

The Reds took two bad ones and laced a grounder toward short. Dib came up with it and rifled it to first to beat the runner by three strides. The second stick wielder hit the ball to short left for a single. A mighty wave of sound welled skyward when Duster Varney came in to take his cut.

"Dust him off, Whitey," a fan shouted.

Varney poled a double to right center and a man scored. When Whitey walked out of the box Dib Trueman hitched a

little closer to second. He stood near Varney.

"Look out into center field when you're out there, Duster!" he said in a low, clear voice. "It might remind you of something."

The man whirled and cursed at Dib. The Cincy coach yelled crazily. Instinctively, Varney hit the dirt. Too late. The second sacker had him out on a peg from Whitey. Varney got up, banged the dirt from his uniform and made a lunge for Dib Trueman. Wild hysteria rippled through the stands when the players flocked to the base line and tore the men apart.

"His conscience still bothers him," was Dib's parting shot when he returned to his position. Mystic fans still shook with merriment when the last Cincy player ground out to third.

IT was a seesaw battle. In the sixth, with the score at two all, the Cincy pilot yanked his second string twirler and shoved in the famous Cy Porter. The crowd had paid good money and had turned out in swarms. The big-time manager would give them a real big league show.

Dib Trueman whacked the veteran's first offering for a triple that bounded off Varney's shins in left field. Even the former Mystic player's enemies were agreeing that he was Major League ivory. The rest of the batting order went down in succession and Dib died on the third sack. On his way in to the visitors' bench Duster Varney looked at his old enemy briefly. Duster seemed shaken. Certainly his play had been off. Perhaps it was the granite stone that stood out there by the center field fence.

At the Cincy bench he said to his manager, "I've got a bad foot. Twisted it out there. I don't know if it'll hold out—"

"You're stayin' in," the pilot cracked. "That's what these people came here for. To see you, Varney. Why do you think we got a game with these hicks? You drew the gate—you hobble through!" He spoke to the trainer. "Take a look at his foot. He won't get up this inning."

Varney took off his shoe and while the trainer kneaded his ankle, he looked out toward the center field fence as though his eyes were drawn that way. Finally he swung his head around when the trainer spoke.

"Can't be very bad—you didn't let out a single squawk."

It happened in the eighth inning. With two down, Dib Trueman came up and the Mystic fans were still in full voice. He had eclipsed Varney both at the plate and in the field. Dib shook a little when

he faced Cy Porter and he reached down for a handful of dirt after the first pitch. Up in the stands Sue sat between her father and her mother. A handkerchief held in her hands was being torn to shreds as her fingers constantly pulled at the linen in the only outward show of her inner turmoil.

Mrs. Linton said sincerely, "Dib is a fine boy—but I'll never forget the way he treated George Varney. Today I thought he might have been man enough to go out there and shake hands with Varney. He should understand by now. But the way he turned his back—"

"Poor sportsmanship," agreed her husband.

"You wait, you just wait," Sue said. She did not know why she said it but she seemed to be waiting for something.

Several seconds after the words had left Sue's mouth, the crack of Dib Trueman's bat lifted the thousands of spectators to their feet. The ball sailed on a line toward left center.

Duster Varney started running. The center fielder had been playing in too far. He had no chance to reach the drive although he was working his legs like pistons toward the flagpole. Suddenly Varney leaped high into the air and snagged the horsehide. He lost his footing when the ball smacked into his glove and he went crashing to the ground. Over the stands which extended close to the outer pasture hung a sudden stunned silence. It swept over the entire park.

DUSTER VARNEY was lying out in center field. The Cincy fielders were bending over him. One got up slowly and waved to the Cincy bench frantically. Fans poured out onto the playing field.

Dib Trueman stood at the plate as if frozen there for several seconds, then he dropped his bat and raced toward the fence. Even before he dug his spikes into the dirt he felt that he knew what had happened. Players were holding the crowd back. The police milled actively, their clubs bared.

Up in the stands Sue Linton sat, gripped with horror, not daring to believe the wild ideas that raced through her brain. She could not move. Her wide, staring eyes were fixed on that group of men who blotted out the monument that had been raised in memory of Tom.

"He fell against it — Varney fell against it," her lips mouthed. "Against Tommy's—"

Andrew Linton, face ashen, queried, "What're you saying, Sue?"

Dib Trueman looked at Duster Varney's white face when the doctor turned him over. There was a jagged cut along

the side of the prostrate player's head. Tom Linton's lifelong friend turned and walked away like a mechanical man. From what seemed a long distance he heard a man say awesomely, "That monument—it was put there for Tommy Linton. It was Varney who—"

"And Trueman was Linton's pal. He's the guy who claimed Varney beamed Linton deliberately. He hit the ball that—"

Dib kept on going. The doctor's words still rang in his ears. "Varney's dead. He hardly knew what happened. He must have struck his head a terrific blow when he fell."

The way it had happened was incredible. Yet all that day Dib had been consumed by a strange premonition. There was no answer for it in this world. His aimless steps carried him past the Cincy manager. He stopped when he heard the man say, "It was strange. He came in and said he had twisted his foot. He wanted to be taken out of the game. But the trainer said there was nothing the matter with his foot—that it was a stall. Who did you say that monument out there was for?"

Dib Trueman waited to hear no more. He crossed the field and some one called to him in a frightened voice. He looked around and saw Sue Linton coming toward him. The girl seized his arm.

"Dib—it was horrible. Now I know you were right. It could not have—happened—unless he had done that—to Tommy. Take me home, Dib. I can't stand it here any longer."

The papers from coast to coast carried the story. Perhaps those who read far from the little town of Mystic scoffed at parts of it. But a small group of people in the Linton home would never doubt a single word of what was written.

"I'm sorry I doubted you, Dib," Tom's mother apologized tearfully. "You were

right. He meant to kill Tommy that day. I never could believe otherwise now." An oppressive silence hung over the room for awhile. Then she went on. "The mills of the gods grind slow but sure—and they grind exceedingly fine."

"We will have concrete proof about Varney before morning," Dib cut in sternly. "I had them pick up a certain man in a plaid coat in Munger's tavern tonight. It has been clear to me for a long time. Tommy found one of Duster's gloves in the gas station that night. He held it over Varney so the fellow would keep away from Sue. Tom knew what it would mean to Sue if he publicly accused Duster of robbery. She had been seen with him a lot—"

"Please," Sue's father begged. "Let's talk no more about it. Tommy will rest easy now." The man got up and moved toward the stairs. With his foot on the first riser he turned.

"Come down to the factory tomorrow," he called to Dib. "I want you to work for me—as my assistant—until you leave for the Majors. Come, Helen, the kids will want to be alone."

"It seems so natural for us to be here—like this, Dib," Sue said gently after a long silence. "I should always have known it could be no one else but you."

Dib kissed her tenderly and held her close. The man did not speak. What was the use of words at a time like this?

The Mystic paper carried a small item a few days later. Dib Trueman, established in the office of the hat factory, read it. It had to do with the moving of the little Linton monument in the Mystic ball park to a far corner of the field so that it might not prove a hazard to players.

Andrew Linton looked up from his desk when Dib Trueman said aloud, "I guess it has served its purpose."

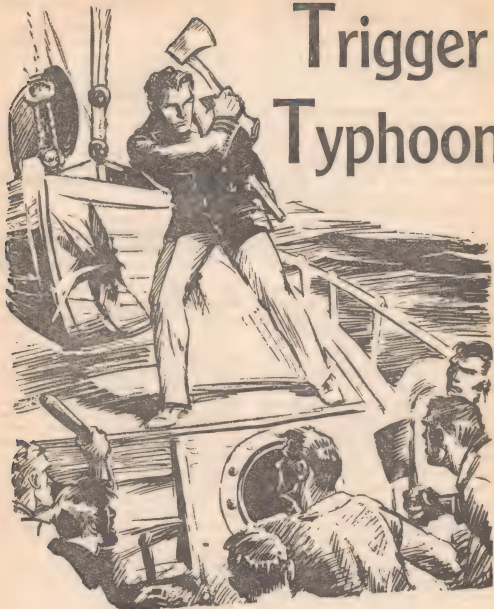


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Trigger Typhoon

By John Dorman

Eric Nelson was'a skipper with a black-marked ticket. And his captaincy of the Evelyn Clark made his future look blacker. For his destination was the double-cross-roads of the sea.

THE four-masted schooner *Evelyn Clark*, bound out of New York in ballast for Tampa, was well at sea by midnight. Captain Eric Nelson, a big ruddy, raw-boned man of thirty-four ordered the mate called then, and prepared to go below.

The mate, Whitey Summers by name, came onto the moonlit poop almost at

once. He was a squat, blond of about Nelson's age, and walked with an elaborate swagger, swinging his heavy shoulders.

"Take over here, mister. Course is southeast by south," Nelson said, starting for the after cabin 'way. Then he turned, abruptly, and looked back at Summers.

And Summers, who was looking at him, grinned derisively.

Nelson checked the quick impulse to wipe the grin off Summers' heavy-jawed face with a back-hand slap. Then he went down the 'way into the salon, where Franklin Case, the schooner's owner, sat at the table, going through a mass of papers. Nelson stood in the scuttle until Case looked up. Then he opened his coat, pushed back his cap, and went up to swing one leg onto the table top, opposite Case.

"How well do you know that man Summers?" Nelson asked, abruptly.

"Reasonably well," Case answered, pursing his lips, and looking at Nelson inquiringly. Case was a thin, swarthy man of fifty, always immaculately clad. He wore a small black mustache and had quick eyes and nervous hands. He was, he had informed Nelson, making the voyage for his health.

Nelson grunted. "I know him damned well. Damned well! I guess you remember I told you I'd rather not have him aboard, and you said he was signed on and you wouldn't fire him." In fact, Nelson wouldn't have taken the berth with Summers aboard if he hadn't been out of a job for a year and a half, at the end of his rope, and in no position to dictate terms. So he had made up his mind to ignore Summers. But that grin of Summers' was something he couldn't ignore.

Case merely nodded.

Nelson went on: "And I guess you know I had my ticket suspended for a year when the *Lucinda Banks* sank, and I was hauled out of my cabin dead drunk, and lowered into a boat like a keg of water?"

"So I've heard," Case said, laughing softly.

"It wasn't so damned funny for me," Nelson remarked, grimly. "And what you didn't hear, Mr. Case, was this: The *Lucinda Banks* didn't just sink. She was scuttled. And I wasn't drunk. I was drugged. And Whitey Summers, mate aboard her, did both jobs; drugged me so he could bore her full of holes. I knew

it, but I couldn't prove it. Nothing was proved at the inquiry but the fact that I was drunk.

"If I hadn't had a damned good reputation," Nelson went on, his eyes playing over Case's swarthy features, "and if there hadn't been plenty of people to swear that now and then I used my good right arm for something besides hoisting liquor—hell, I'd have lost my ticket altogether. As it was, Summers put me on the wharf for a year and a half, all told. I don't mind telling you that for a month before I signed on with you, and got an advance, I hadn't had a square meal or a clean shirt.

"And Summers," added Nelson, "to cover up his own dirty work, put a mark against my record I'll never live down. If I ever so much as drop a mud hook onto a cable crossing, I'm likely to have my ticket jerked for good. I don't know why Summers scuttled the *Lucinda Banks*, but you know as well as I do that more than one old hooker has been sold to an insurance company since the war."

He stopped speaking, swung down off the table, and drew his cap back in place. Then, towering in the low-ceilinged room, he said: "I'm telling you this so you'll understand why I'm all set to drop onto Summers like a ton of brick if he so much as looks sidewise—let alone giving me any more of the insubordinate grins he was giving me tonight."

Case leaned back, tapping a pencil on his teeth, smiling enigmatically and letting his eyes run slowly over Nelson. At last he said, "Sit down, captain. There's a little matter I was going to take up with you tomorrow, but I might as well do it tonight."

He paused, and Nelson dropped into a chair. Case thrust his papers into a brief case, and said:

"They tell me, Nelson, that you've reached the point where you'd do about anything for a thousand dollars—or perhaps five thousand."

Nelson's head snapped up, and he stared at Case. Then he leaned forward on his elbows, and said carefully: "That might not be right, Case. I wouldn't bank on it."

CASE smiled a polite, disbelieving smile. Then he said, abruptly: "Nelson, I've got a proposition for you. No matter what you think of it, hear me out.

Now, this vessel isn't the *Evelyn Clark*. It's her sister ship, the *Dorothy Lee Clark*. I owned them both. The *Evelyn* was in a lot better shape than this vessel, and had thirty thousand insurance covering her. I doubt if I could get five thousand on this schooner. I sold the *Evelyn*, Nelson. But before I sold her I switched names. I sold the *Evelyn* as the *Dorothy Lee*; I'm keeping the *Dorothy Lee* as the *Evelyn*, because of the insurance."

"Uh-huh," Nelson said, in a level tone. "And now you want to take this hooker out and pull the plug, eh?"

"Exactly," Case replied. Then he smiled, queerly. "More than that—I want to go down with her!"

Nelson stared at him. "What in hell—"

Case laughed, enjoying Nelson's astonishment. "It happens, Nelson, that I'm in a position where I will face bankruptcy in a few more months—or can get away now with perhaps two hundred thousand dollars, and retire in comfort abroad. I plan to retire, Nelson.

"When this schooner goes down, I must to all intents and purposes go down with her. I have more than one hundred thousand dollars in life insurance, which my wife will collect, along with the insurance on the vessel and some other money."

He smiled, delightedly. "The beauty of the plan is this: My death will make the sinking of the vessel look authentic—and the sinking of the vessel will make my death look authentic. There'll be no difficulty with the insurance companies. That's plucking two plums with one marine disaster.

"The procedure is simply this, Nelson," he continued. "We'll ease down the coast, on the road to Tampa, keeping close to land. Whenever we catch a good stiff blow, we'll open the seacock and take to the boats. There are two new boats, as well as the old one on top of the deck house, you may have noticed. The crew and the second mate will go in the first. We'll tell them to make off, not wait for us. And if I know the sort of scum we've got aboard, they'll do it. The story in that case will be that I was drowned while sliding down into the boat. You, Summers and I will go in the second boat, of course.

"At any rate, it will be a simple matter to get lost from the first boat. We'll land at an isolated spot. If the crew saw

me leaving the vessel, I shall apparently be drowned at the landing. We can smash up the boat, or sink it, to make good the story. Summers and you will testify that I was drowned. And there's five thousand in it for you, Nelson. My guarantee of your good faith will be that you don't get your money until I get mine. By that time, I'll be safe."

He looked tensely at Nelson. Nelson looked back. It was plain, now, that Summers was merely Case's lieutenant, and that if Nelson had any trouble it would be with Case rather than with Summers. Then Nelson said, evenly:

"I told you, Case, that you might be wrong. I don't claim to be any saint, and I don't care a damn what happens to insurance companies. But a lot of things are out of my line, and scuttling ships is one of them."

"Sure of that, Nelson?" The words slid softly from Case's lips.

Nelson's eyes glistened. "Sure of it, Case!" Then he said, contemptuously: "You would wait until you got me out at sea before saying anything about this, wouldn't you? You would take it for granted that any man who's down and out would jump at a chance to be a cats-paw for you. Case, you're a louse! If I did scuttle ships, I wouldn't do it for you."

Case's sharp voice came: "Wait a minute, Nelson. Before you make that final—ask yourself why I did wait until we got to sea. And why I sent for a waterfront bum to take command—a man who won't be missed much if he doesn't come back." His right hand dropped into his coat pocket.

Nelson shot to his feet, veins bulging in his throat.

In a flashing movement Case leaped away, keeping the table between Nelson and himself.

"Don't do it, Nelson. Sit down!"

Just in time Nelson caught himself; just in time his eyes focused, not on Case's eyes, but on the automatic pistol in Case's hand. A sigh slipped from Nelson's lips. Then he sat down.

"You're a damned fool, Nelson," Case told him. "You can't interfere with my plans. Summers can handle the job alone, if need be. I've already got from you all that I had to have—your name on a contract, and your charming person aboard

here. I could have used your help, but I can get along without it. I had to leave port with a licensed skipper in command; the law is particular on that point. And there wasn't any use trying to take you along without cutting you in. I didn't think you'd turn out to be such a fool. But I was ready for you, in case you did."

Nelson folded his arms, studying Case through narrowed eyes. "How'd you happen to pick on me, Case? Am I the only down-and-outer with a master's ticket in sail?"

"The only one whose reputation is still good enough so an insurance company wouldn't raise hell about his being trusted with a ship. The only thing actually on the records against you is that you were drunk at a bad time. Summers mentioned you, and thought you'd listen to reason, after what you've been through the last year and a half. I was surprised at first when you objected to him. He seemed rather pleased at the prospect of having you aboard."

"He would be," Nelson said, shortly. "His idea of a joke. I remember that he laughed until he cried when the cook aboard the *Lucinda Banks* stuck his hand in a kettle of boiling grease. Tickled Summers pink to hear the poor devil scream. And from then on 'til she went down Summers kept asking the cook when he was going to serve up the hand he'd cooked. And this deal struck him funny because he knew he'd see me brought down to his level—or in a jam."

He looked at Case steadily. After a moment he asked, "Well, where do you and I stand now, Case?"

"As things have turned out, I'll be keeping you rather closely in your room." Case gestured toward one of the two cabins which opened off the salon, curtained recesses in the salon itself had bunks for the mates. "For the sake of appearances, you'll eat here in the salon, and you'll walk a little on deck. Under my eye, of course. And I won't need to point out to you that you'd better a damned sight exercise the master's time-honored privilege of talking to nobody. If you decide you want to be cut in, and can convince me you're on the level, let me know. Otherwise—"

"Otherwise," Nelson said grimly, "I'll go down with my ship—locked in my cabin."

"Otherwise," Case agreed, "you will."

RED-EYED from a sleepless night, Nelson next morning paced the skipper's walk by the weather rail on the poop deck, taking stock of his situation. The schooner rolled southward, off the Jersey coast. By the taffrail, Case lolled in spotless whites in a canvas deck chair, soaking in sunshine. The sight of him brought oaths leaping to Nelson's lips.

Across from Nelson the second mate leaned on the lee rail—"Hatteras Bill" Winlay, some sixty years old, gray-haired, gray-mustached, lanky. All Nelson knew of him was that he had a good enough reputation as an eternal mate—a man who never had been able to get a master's ticket. He appraised Winlay. The man looked honest. And once when Winlay's weather-faced eyes met Nelson's there seemed to be an answering gleam in them. But then they moved away again, Winlay's grizzled jaw worked on his tobacco, and he spat over the rail.

And Nelson expected no help from the crew, which numbered eleven, including the donkey-engine man cook and steward. Eleven men that a shipping master, for a dollar a head, had combed out of dives and flophouses. They'd have no loyalty to anything but their bellies, thought Nelson, addressing them under his breath:

"If I was in command here, the first damned thing I'd do would be to call the lot of you after and have somebody search your bunks for weapons! That'd give me the jump on you if I had to smash a couple of you later on." They'd have brass knuckles, blackjacks and knives at least, and probably a couple of cheap pistols.

The schooner herself, Nelson saw, was in fair shape; as good as could be expected in days when windjammer owners sang everything to the tune of, "She'll have to earn her paint and oakum and new canvas before she gets them, captain." Case hadn't spent any money fitting her out, of course. All he had bought was two boats, each motor-powered. The larger was stowed on the starboard side, amidships; the other, at the stern.

As for Case's offer to cut Nelson in when he changed his mind—that was so much bilge, served up to keep Nelson from feeling desperate and ready to do anything. Case never would trust Nelson now.

About the only hope Nelson saw was getting his fist on a gun. If he had a gun, he'd have a chance. But the only thing

he had was a jackknife. And this wasn't a hole a man could dig his way out of with a jackknife, Nelson mused.

Then a thought flashed into his mind. There was, at that, one thing he could do with a jackknife. He could cut through his cabin floor into the hold. From there, he could make his way to deck, when she was abandoned, and throw together a raft.

He forced down his exultant smile, and paced the deck. At eight bells, noon, Case arose. Nelson, catching his signaling eyes, went slowly down into the cabin.

Summers was arising from the table, picking yellow teeth with a match. For a moment he stood squarely in Nelson's way, looking up at him. He was nearly a head the shorter, and bandy legged, with an enormous body. Then he moved elaborately out of Nelson's way, laughed tauntingly, and went up the way to stand his watch.

Nelson's teeth caught on his lip, and he sat down at the table. The meal over, he was herded into his cabin with a jerk of Case's head. The lock clicked in the door. And Nelson went to work.

He dragged the bed away from the wall so that shoving it back would conceal the hole he would cut. It was a long, tough job he had set himself to. The flooring was two-inch southern pine, hard with pitch; the small knife blistered his hand in thirty minutes. He wrapped the hand in a handkerchief, and kept on, chuckling as he visualized the crew abandoning her — himself closing the seacock and preparing a raft.

Then an idea shot into his mind, and he eased back on his heels with the thrill of it. If the *Dorothy Lee* lived through the storm that would be threatening when she was abandoned, he'd have a try at taking her in. It wasn't impossible. Bold men had worked square-rigged ships alone, with no donkey engine to help them. If he could keep her afloat, he would do it. And there was the engine to pump for him.

That would go a long ways toward erasing the black mark Summers had put on his record. It would put Summers and maybe Case in a federal prison. It would bring Case's retirement to an abrupt end.

And then Nelson flung back his head and laughed aloud. Yes, and there'd be money in it for Eric Nelson. Maybe as much as Case had offered! He wouldn't

be able to claim salvage, since he was signed on as master, but the Board of Marine Underwriters would see that he was rewarded for preventing an insurance fraud. That would be the cream of the joke, if he could make as much for taking her in as Case had offered for sending her down.

He checked his laughter, and his knife gouged away at the wood. He was praying, now, that nothing would happen to mar Case's plans—that he would be locked in when they pulled the plug.

THE schooner was hugging the Florida coast when it happened.

Prone on his bed, shortly after noon, in the steaming thick heat of his cabin, Nelson felt the vessel heel suddenly to the press of a burst of wind. He sat up, tensely. There was storm in the air. This might be the time.

In a moment he heard Case, outside in the salon, saying: "Glass is falling fast, Summers."

And Summers' heavy voice replied: "It'll get a hell of a lot worse before it gets any better!"

Doors slammed. Feet pounded on deck; a stronger gust of wind laid the vessel over and held her there. The long drawn cry, "All hands!" came faintly to Nelson's ears. A sail slatted, and boomed like a sunrise gun.

Nelson, lifting the sections of planking he had cut from the floor, heard the gurgle of running water; they'd pulled the plug. Tense on his feet, he tried the locked door, stared through the portholes. A stiff east wind was flattening seas a southerly breeze had raised, and the water darkened ominously as the afternoon sun was clouded. An east wind—that meant a treacherous lee shore not far away.

Hoarse voices were shouting; blocks creaked and lines thumped on deck. Some sail was coming down, for safety's sake. Winlay's shrieking voice arose:

"Twelve inches in the well!" Then, when it seemed he'd hardly had time to chalk the sounding rod, "Thirteen inches!" Presently, "Fourteen!"

Summers roared: "To hell with this hooker! She won't ride it out, if she's leaking like that. We're leaving her now, while we've got a chance!"

Nelson nodded. They'd better be leaving her while the force of the wind still

was holding the seas down, instead of raising them as it would be in a little while. Grimly, he held himself in hand. Time dragged painfully. Out of the ports he saw the seas to the east rising savagely, in the chop of cross swells. He could see no more.

He heard the commands to get over the motor-powered boat on the starboard side. Then there was a blistering roar of profanity from Summers, and a half dozen voices bellowing at once. Nelson listened eagerly. Something had gone wrong.

Then out of the babel he learned that a rusty davit had given way, and the life-boat now hung by its stern, its bow plunging into water. It thumped against the side as the schooner rolled.

A long time passed while they tried to get the boat righted. Nelson could picture them at it, vainly fighting to get a line on the bow. Case had to have two boats, to carry out his plan. And the boat atop the deck house was all but worthless—old, dried out, brittle.

Suddenly—a frenzied shout, a roar of answers. And then — silence. Nelson waited tensely. The silence grew ominous, foreboding.

At last, the answer flashed into his mind. The silence, the inactivity, could mean but one thing. In the excitement, the schooner had gone too close to the shore. Now, she was so dangerously close to the shoals that they saw no hope of getting her off. And the storm had reached such violence that they despaired of getting a boat away at all, let alone through the surf to safety.

Nelson waited no longer. Ripping open the hatchway he had cut, he dropped into the hold, where two feet of stinking black water sloshed in the crevices of the rock ballast. Lighting matches on his thumbnail, he crawled to the seacock and shut it off.

Whoever had opened the seacock had left a between deck hatchway open. Nelson made for it, scrambled into the 'tween decks, came out in the engine room, and went up the 'way. For a moment he crouched there.

With a slow, sullen inevitability the schooner was moving obliquely down onto the beach. The line of the surf was little more than a mile away. The first of the shoals she'd strike would be closer. She was carrying only her head sails and the

spanker and mizzen-sail, triple reefed; the fore and main were furled.

She was close-hauled to the wind, lying about seven points of it. But the wind, now a stiff blow, was swinging to the south of east. She couldn't be hauled close enough to bring her off. In three miles, or four, she would pile up. A small boat still might live, if gotten away, but the one good boat would not hold more than six men safely. And no boat could go through the surf now thundering on the beach.

THE vessel shouldn't have been where she was, but it was easy enough to see how she had gotten there. The Gulf Stream runs only a few miles from the Florida coast. The schooner had been sailing inside it, and probably no more than five miles from the beach. The blow had struck suddenly. She had then had sail shortened, and been close-hauled, to gain time for getting away. The shifting of the wind, swinging in the normal course of storms, had brought her into danger before that danger was noticed, in the effort to get the fouled boat righted.

The helmsman had kept her close to the wind, as a helmsman should. No business of his to mark where she went; his business merely to keep her full and by—the wind, with full sails. Running before the wind, a helmsman holds to a course; running close-hauled, he holds to the wind.

The crew now huddled in the waist, by the lee rail, looking shoreward. Case, Summers, Winlay and two helmsmen were on the poop, simply waiting for her to pile up. After that there would be nothing to wait for except the arrival of a life-saving crew, which might or might not happen before she went to pieces. If her masts went by the board when she struck, she'd be so weakened she wouldn't last long.

For an instant Nelson was dismayed. The only chance was to get her around on the other tack, before the wind increased so much it would be impossible. And getting her around seemed hopeless. You can't turn a long, lank vessel on the palm of your hand as you can a thick, stubby one.

She didn't have room to head for the shore and wear around until she came on the other tack. And she couldn't head into the wind and come about. She didn't

have the speed, the headway. Close-hauled as she was, she barely moved; it was leeway as much as headway that was taking her onto the shoals.

Heading her into the wind would mean merely that she wouldn't go far enough around to fill on the other tack. She'd miss stays and be set back, driving stern first toward the beach. She had to have headway to come into the wind, and go about—and she could gain headway only by easing off and driving down onto the shoals.

Only one thing might save her, and that was an old, half-forgotten trick, invoked only in desperate emergencies. A trick that would cost her an anchor and fifty fathom of chain, but might work. So hazardous a piece of seamanship that men have been knighted for performing it. By casting her, club-hauling her, she might be gotten around.

With sudden decision Nelson went out of concealment and onto her heaving deck, striding for the poop. And then he stopped, struck with a bitter thought. Concentrated upon the problem of getting her off, he had overlooked and thrown aside his golden opportunity to search for weapons. It was too late now; he'd been seen. There was nothing to do now but go on. Case had his eyes on him.

Case's hand was in his coat pocket, gripping the butt of his pistol, when Nelson reached the poop, but Case left unasked the questions that narrowed his eyes.

Nelson told him, shortly, his own eyes gleaming: "I'll take her off, if you want her off."

Summers laughed. "The hell you will, or anybody else!"

Case shut him up with a vicious glance. Then Case said: "Go ahead."

Nelson whirled to Summers and Winlay, and gave his orders. "We'll cast her," he said. "Club-haul her. Mister, you get forward and cockbill the lee anchor. Drag out fifty fathom of chain, and loosen a shackle pin there, ready for slipping. Winlay! Break out your best hawser and bring it aft here. Bring an axe, too."

Case's voice arose: "You can't anchor her here! No anchor will hold ten minutes!"

Nelson laughed, over his shoulder. "Ten seconds may be enough, Case."

It was grim work, then, with a dozen men where there should have been twice

that, and no time to spare. Nelson stayed by the windward rail, giving his terse orders. From time to time his eyes turned to the roaring white line of the surf. Case stayed behind him, watching, ready.

THE hawser came out, was belayed on the poop, passed out of the after warping chocks and along her lee side, outside of the shrouds and rigging. Men sweat blood over that. And, forward, men tore their hands on rusty anchor chain. Back on the poop, Nelson forgot about Case, licked salt from his lips, and goaded them on. At last, the forward end of the hawser was bent to the anchor chain, just below the loosened shackle pin. All was ready.

Something caught at Nelson's heart as he turned to the helmsman. "Up helm; ease her off." Now was the test.

Her head fell away from the wind, and she turned quartering toward the beach. Less than a mile away, now. The first of the shoals would be hardly half that. The line of surf jumped suddenly outward, as waves grew bigger and their bottoms struck lower down and farther out on the shelving sands.

In three cable lengths, little more than a quarter of a mile, she must turn again. No time now to be thinking of what would happen if something gave way. She must turn again, come about on the other tack. If she did not make it, she would never have another chance to try.

With the wind coming against iron-tight sails, she gained headway. A sea poured green water into her low waist; men leaped like monkeys for handholds. She plowed quartering for the beach, shaking spray from her port flank that the wind caught and whirled over her. Men poised tensely at their stations.

A cable's length, that and a half. On the shore, palms bent before the wind, so close that Nelson saw coconuts blowing away. Two cable lengths—three. "Down helm!" he roared. Then, through cupped hands: "Stand by that anchor!"

The helm went down, her head turned away from the beach, and a wave sloshed over her forecastle, letting blinding spray shoot the length of her. She came into the wind, but no more. She would not go into its eye, then pass, to come on the other tack. Of her own accord she'd have missed stays, and driven stern first down onto the beach.

"Let go the anchor!" Nelson bellowed, tense as a sword thrust into the decking.

The anchor went; between press of wind and press of waves she lurched backward. Winlay's men fought to bring her mizzen boom and spanker boom amidships, so that the sails might not slat and split. Forward, Summers' men eased off the headsheets. She surged on backward. Then the anchor caught with a staggering shock. And held!

"Knock out the shackle pin!" Nelson's voice went booming up wind to the fore-castle deck. The shackle pin came out; the chain fell apart. Now, the strain of the anchor came on the hawser belayed at the stern. Her poop rose on a great wave as she settled against the hawser. It held. Her stern was fast; the wind could do nothing but blow her around, the way she should go. Any boat anchored by the stern, but pointing to windward, must swing around if the anchor holds.

She wallowed around. They'd cast her! An old trick, a forgotten trick, that had worked again.

Forward, Summers had his men by the headsail sheets, to haul them aft as the vessel swung so the sails would fill on the other tack. Aft, Winlay's men held the spanker sheet; eased it off, belayed it. Raced for the mizzen sheet; eased it, belayed it. So she came around, filled on the starboard tack, her stern now pointing toward the beach at about the same angle her stem had been pointing. Nelson snatched up the axe and cut the hawser, the spring which had turned her and set her right.

Doggedly, groaning in her guts, trembling in the wind, spray drenched, she beat away from the beach with the same steady sureness with which she'd been bearing down on it. Nelson turned to the shivering Case, a wet plucked hen in his soaked clothing, and grinned at him.

"That wasn't so bad for a waterfront bum!"

But the laughter died on his lips as he caught the hard look in Case's eyes, and came back to reality.

BY DUSK, the wind was blowing with half-storm force, with full promise of becoming a whole storm before it was over. Beyond a whole storm, there is only the hurricane, in the seaman's rating of weather force. They have her to.

If the wind backed up into the east as

it gained violence, she would be lost. She could no longer run close-hauled, and in a little while she would have no choice but to run before the wind. So if the wind backed into the east, instead of swinging around in the normal way of storms to blow itself out in the west or northwest, she would inevitably be blown down again on the coast she so lately had beaten away from.

Nelson drove on at the work of saving her, determined now that he would take her in if the heavens fell. And always Case, wet and cold in his soaked clothing, was at Nelson's heels, his hand in his pocket, his hard eyes watching Nelson's every move.

By night, with lightning ripping the sky, the wind veered to south, then south by west, and they eased her away before it. Under jibs and triple-reefed mizzen alone, she plowed through the sea at a ten-knot clip, water roaring past her sides. At eight bells, eight o'clock, the wind jumped into the west, and increased again. She squared off, to run before it, driving now at twelve or thirteen knots.

Every half hour the helm was relieved and two fresh men fought that lust for broaching to and rolling in the trough which possesses every vessel driving before a storm. At ten o'clock Winlay reported to the poop that one pump, already going to clear the bilge of the water taken in through the seacock, could not hold back what was coming through seams her straining had opened. The donkey-engine man had started the second pump.

Nelson nodded, curtly, his eyes on the spanker. Bare poles was all she needed, now, but it was too late to take more canvas in. A start at it would mean split sails blowing away in chunks. At midnight the wind was out of the northwest. Now two pumps could not hold the water she was taking; slowly it rose in the well. And there was no chance now to break out handpumps; men could do nothing but cling to life lines, to stays and shrouds.

It was two o'clock when the wind lost force, a little, then rapidly. At three Nelson ordered the handpump to be rigged; soon four men were at the brakes, laboring in the red glow from the stack of the hard-driven donkey engine. And she was hove to again, as the wind died away. She couldn't as yet fight windward, reaching for a harbor, but she must go no

further away than need be. And off to the east lay scattering islands.

Just where he was Nelson didn't know. She had driven northeasterly, for the most part. She'd be forty to sixty miles off the coast, and a hundred or more from Jacksonville, the nearest harbor. By three-thirty she was under way again. And Winlay reported, with an exultant tone:

"We're holding the water, captain; gaining on it a little!"

Nelson nodded. Then, for the first time in many an hour he relaxed, and remembered that he was thirsty, hungry, tired; that his lips were cracked from licking off salt spray, his body worn with the strain.

And then he realized that he had no time to be hungry, tired. He had forgotten, for the moment, that Case was behind him, watching. All through the storm Case's straining eyes had been on him. Never had Nelson gotten out of easy pistol shot. Never had Case come within reach of Nelson's hands. Never had Nelson had a chance to question old Winlay.

A wan moon, breaking through the darkness to ride high among scattering clouds announced that the storm was past. For fourteen hours Nelson had kept command; soon enough now it would be snatched from him again—just as soon as Case felt all danger was over he'd have Nelson a prisoner again. This time, he'd undoubtedly have Nelson ironed, since he had gotten loose before. Nelson must have weapons, or give up the vessel.

There was but one way to get weapons; he must elude Case long enough to search the ship. That didn't seem impossible.

Nelson looked over his shoulder at Summers. "Take over, mister," he said, matter-of-factly. Then he strode forward, down the poop 'way, into the waist, up to the after engine room 'way; the engine room was in the 'tween decks, amidships. There was no need to look behind to see if Case was following; he would be.

NELSON stuck his head down the engine room hatch, and roared: "What the hell's the matter down here?" The engineer, a half-naked Mobile Negro, sweating in streams, started, paused with his scoop poised. He knew, as well as Nelson did, that nothing whatever was wrong there. In that instant Nelson shot down the 'way, past the engineer, and

out into the dark of the 'tween decks. It was done so quickly that Case, duped into believing Nelson had gone to the engine room to put something to rights, had no time to stop him or to shoot.

For a moment Nelson lay silent in the darkness, waiting to see if Case would be foolish enough to follow. He wasn't. Nelson arose, groping his way forward to the crew's quarters. With swift hands he went through bunks and baggage, by the feeble light of an almost oilless lamp. Knives, brass knuckles, a blackjack, a belaying pin—then, at last, a revolver. Cheap, nickel-plated, but a gun. And loaded. He swept up the rest of the truck, opened a port, and threw it out.

Then, groping blindly, blundering against stanchions, he went aft, and into the cabin, ready now to be set upon at any instant. When Case next met Nelson, he would be gunning for him. In Case's room he found an automatic, mate to the one Case carried. Neither in Summers' bunk nor in Winlay's was there anything.

Armed, Nelson stood in the salon, under the swaying lamp. One man against thirteen. If only he dared follow his hunch, and trust Winlay. But already there were two men with guns against him; he dared not thrust a loaded revolver into a third hand.

Then he laughed. He opened the revolver, snapped the cartridges out into the palm of his hand. Taking each in turn, he pulled out the bullet with his teeth, spilled out the powder, replaced the bullet, and stuffed the cartridges into the gun. That loaded the weapon so he could trust anybody with it, yet no one examining it ever would discover it was harmless. And soon enough Winlay would have chances to use the gun on Nelson. If he didn't try to, he could be trusted.

And now Nelson must get cautiously to Winlay, to speak with him. He made his way back to the engine room, past the glowering Negro, and up the 'way until he could peer forth. Moonlight showed him the length of the vessel. Neither Case nor Summers was in sight. Winlay was a few yards away.

"Winlay," Nelson called, softly. Winlay came.

In quick words Nelson told him: "Winlay, this hooker is due to be scuttled. Because I know too much, and refused the job, I'm due to go down with her. I've

been a prisoner, up 'til now. Did you know that?"

Winlay's quick nod and quick comprehension showed that he did know enough to make belief easy. "Knew something was wrong. I've been trying my damndest to get to you when Case wasn't around, but never could. I knew from the way you looked at me you wanted to talk to me."

"All right," Nelson said, holding up the revolver. "You with me, or not? Want it hot out of the muzzle, or the gun by the butt?"

Winlay's reaching hand gave his answer. Nelson, passing over the worthless revolver, asked: "Where are Case and Summers?"

"They went hell-bent down into the salon, not two minutes ago," Winlay answered. Nelson nodded; probably they'd heard him closing a scuttle as he left; might have glimpsed him through the skylight. He hadn't been any too careful, at that. He said:

"We'll get 'em as they come out."

The two men moved along the moon-lit deck, still heaving with the surge of dying seas. What they were going into, they didn't know; perhaps easy, quick victory—perhaps a sudden bark of pistols from men concealed in the forward cabin 'way. But there was no sound, save the clank of the pumps, the mumble of men's voices, the slosh of water alongside.

At the break of the poop, Nelson's hand shot out, to grip Winlay's arm. "Wait!" he whispered. Then he spotted the sound. Somebody was coming up the steps of the forward cabin 'way.

Ordering Winlay on by a jerk of his head, Nelson leaped to the poop just as Case came out of the scuttle, alone. A fierce joy flowed through Nelson, and cracked in his quick: "Hands up, Case! Put 'em up!"

Case's face, gray in the half light, writhed in malevolent lines, but slowly his hands came up. "Turn around," Nelson told him. Case turned. Nelson, with his free hand, reached out for the gun in Case's pocket. Then that hand stopped in midair, and stayed there.

Summers had come out of the after cabin 'way, the great bulk of his body looming against the sky. And old Winlay, with that worthless gun, was going after him. Something cold gripped Nelson's heart.

He never had thought for an instant,

when he gave Winlay that worthless gun, of putting him in a place where he'd have to use it. He'd figured it as a good way to test Winlay, nothing more. And he hadn't figured on Winlay showing any such streak of nerve.

Now, Winlay was between Nelson and Summers. Nelson could not shoot, could not move. Hatred of himself for the thing he had done froze him to the spot. He had sent the old man into almost certain death. Summers was a ruthless, red-tempered devil. If his gun was drawn, he'd shoot it out. Even if his gun wasn't drawn, his was the kind of temper that sends men hurtling against any odds, blind with the lust to kill. And Winlay might as well have been armed with a toy balloon.

Winlay's cracked voice came: "Hands up, Summers! Hoist 'em!"

IT WAS all over in a second, yet that second to Nelson was ages long. An eternity passed before Summers' arms seemed to raise like slow-drifting smoke.

Nelson breathed at last. That had been close! Then he came to himself abruptly. His suspended hand dipped into Case's pocket, and came out with the automatic. Quickly he felt for more weapons, found none, and whirled Case around.

For a moment he looked at him. Then, with a resounding open-handed blow, he sent him sprawling to the deck, and went to Winlay's aid. They took two revolvers from Summers, and the shoulder holsters in which he carried them. Summers, his bullet-like head sunk into his broad shoulders, looked at them, and said nothing.

Nelson took the nicked pistol from Winlay's hand, and tossed it overboard. Then he handed Winlay the guns and holsters Summers had had. "These are better guns," he said, steadily. He looked at Summers, and at last asked him, with long-hoarded resentment rippling through his words:

"Why don't you grin now, you louse?"

Summers neither grinned nor spoke. Case by now was on his feet, holding one hand to his jaw, and moving it back and forth.

"Case, and you, Summers, get forward, and down to the pump. Jump!" Nelson said, tersely. "Come on, Winlay."

At the pump, he ordered two men away from it, and Summers and Case into their places. He told the crew, "Let me know if

they soldier! Or cure 'em of it yourselves!"

A howl of laughter answered him. It was a joke they would appreciate—having an owner and a mate toiling at the brakes with them. Leaving Winlay in charge at the pumps, Nelson went aft.

Dawn brought a southerly breeze and the promise of blistering heat. The swells still heaved mountainously, but there was no menace in them, and the schooner, with all sail set again, pressed slowly westward toward the Florida coast.

Nelson was at the wheel, so that every possible man might be at the hand pump. His two automatics were thrust into his

bor mouth. The breeze was failing; the sun beat down. She was making but two knots, now. He held her due west, since the Gulf Stream would give him northing enough.

At two o'clock, he lashed the wheel and went to the foremast head for a look. And, dim to the westward, he saw the low purplish-gray line of the coast. It would be twenty or twenty-five miles away. Four o'clock came, passed. In a few more minutes he could see the coast from the poop.

Then a man laboring at the pumps suddenly straightened, and cried out: "Land ho!"



waist band. In the waist, under Winlay's eye, four men sweated at the brakes; seven sprawled on the deck, asleep. Every fifteen minutes Winlay changed shifts; fifteen minutes of that brutal labor was about all tired men could stand. The cook kept steaming pots of meat and coffee ready; the donkey-engine man toiled in his hot room. They were keeping the water down, gaining a very little.

At eight, Winlay took the wheel while Nelson shot the sun and worked out his position. The figures, still to be checked by a noon sight, placed him about sixty miles southeast of the mouth of the St. Johns River, harbor for Jacksonville.

At noon, he figured his position to be forty miles southeast by east of the har-

Nelson didn't bother to make the routine reply: "Where away?" His shoulders squared, and he set his jaw. This was a moment he had been dreading—the crew's first sight of land. The breeze might pick up, and probably would at sunset. A tug, loitering by the river mouth waiting for a tow, might sight his tall masts and come out for him. One of three things would happen. He would get a wind, a tug, or hell.

And within thirty minutes, as the schooner rolled in glassy swells, a shambling tall seaman detached himself from the group by the pump and came aft to the break of the poop.

"Look here, captain," he said. "They ain't no use of us tearing our guts out at

that pump. We can make shore in the boats, easy as not. The old one's plenty seaworthy enough for this weather. Hell, you could paddle ashore in a wash tub!"

NELSON looked over the wheel, wondering if Case had suggested this. With the vessel abandoned, Case might still get a chance to dispose of Nelson, fake his own death, and come out on top. Nelson answered the man:

"You'll stand by your duty, or it'll be me who's tearing your guts out. Get back there, damn you, and thank your stars I'm not ordering you out with the boats to tow her in. Jump!"

The man jumped—and as if that was an agreed upon signal, the hell that Nelson had dreaded broke loose. There was a snarling roar of voices amidships. Men swarmed around Winlay, brandishing knives and belaying pins.

Winlay came backing out of the mêlée a revolver in either hand, and screaming like a seagull, but his words were lost in the babel. A hurled belaying pin rang on Winlay's shin. His guns cracked once, above the tumult. Some one howled.

Then a gleaming flash of light shot out toward the old man. He went down like a steer, blood smearing his face. And the cook's cleaver dropped beside him.

Nelson jerked out his pistols, fired two shots with each. The deck quickly cleared. Every man was out of sight, hidden either in the deck house, which contained the galley, in the engine room, or forward of the galley or the engine room 'way housings.

A roar of catcalls and laughter came hurtling at Nelson. His eyes dropped to Winlay, sprawled out on the deck, still clutching his two revolvers and with the cleaver beside him.

Then Case's voice arose. "Now, Nelson! This has gone far enough. You may be in command back there—but we're in command here. And we'll do no more pumping, Nelson. We'll give you a break. Take that boat aft there, and get away, if you're afraid of us. I'll let a man come aft and help you put it over. You can take Winlay's carcass with you, if you want it. We'll take the boat here, and get away ourselves. Do that, Nelson—or we'll stop the donkey engine, and let her go down, and then you can't help yourself from taking to the boats. You might as well come to it first as last."

Nelson saw now that the whole thing had been planned in advance, and beyond any doubt Case had planned it. It was simple enough, once it was laid forth, as all strokes of genius are. Nelson could agree to Case's proposal, or try to drive thirteen men from concealment before he went down under a rain of belaying pins, knives, chunks of coal and anything else they could grab up for weapons.

With all the pumps stopped, it would be only a matter of time—and maybe not much time — before the *Dorothy Lee* would go down. And Nelson couldn't hope to hunt the rats out of their holes. He might get one or two; then they'd get him.

His searching eyes fell on the axe with which he had cut the hawser that had sprung her off the beach. It had not been noticed; it lay where he had dropped it. He looked into the waist again. All was silence there, now; they were waiting for his answer. Then, as if to urge his reply, the engine-driven pumps stopped their steady beat.

Slowly he pushed the pistols into his waistband, and began lashing the wheel, which was a mere formality in that fitful breeze, save that it gave him time to think. That done, he called:

"Looks like you win, Case."

HE WALKED over toward the axe, and stopped beside it. Then his left hand snatched out a pistol, his long bare right arm flashed down to grab up the axe, and he leaped to the boat at the stern. One terrific blow smashed in its side.

Jerking the axe free, he wheeled and charged forward, a great, berserk figure, pistol in one hand, axe in the other. He leaped down over the break of the poop without bother to seek the steps, and raced across twenty yards of open deck.

The shock of the surprise protected him for a moment. In that moment he was beside the deck-house, the axe flashing around his head. And one crashing blow stove a yard-square hole in its garboard.

Then they were after him. They shot out of their holes; belaying pins whirled by him — something thumped viciously against his ribs. A dazzling flash of light marked a knife blade, passing his eyes.

Now the lot of them spread in a half circle before him — bearded, sweating, half-naked men, grimly silent, and every

one armed with some weapon. Nelson, backing away, swung the axe around his head, a gleaming wall of steel no man cared to charge.

Then the big Negro engineer sprang in, sluicing bar raised for the axe to break against. Nelson fired one shot beneath the path of the axe blade, and at point-blank range. The Negro went down.

Summers, insane with fury, lurched forward, armed with a broken-off chunk of a heavy steering oar. Again Nelson fired, aiming for the great mass of Summers' torso. Summers flinched and went white, but came on—then dropped, the force of his charge carrying him almost to Nelson's feet.

Irresolute, the crew paused, sobered by the death of two men in as many minutes. They stayed where they were, lacking the courage to charge, the impulse to run. Nelson backed away, grinning.

He stopped by Winlay's side. He must get the revolvers Winlay had; they couldn't be left where the crew might reach them. The last whirl of the axe took it overboard; the cleaver followed it, and Nelson picked up the guns Winlay had in either hand, thrust them, too, into his waist band, and snatched up Winlay. The weather-faded eyes opened. Nelson's heart leaped. The cleaver had struck on the flat of the blade, not the edge. Winlay, in spite of the blood, was not badly hurt.

Nelson swung the old man up to his shoulder. Then, with one pistol covering the irresolute crew, he backed away to the poop, and upon it. He laid Winlay in the shade of the spanker. Then he turned, and yelled:

"Now, you lice — you can pump or drown! You can take her in or go down

with her. Get back to your work. Jump!"

The sight of him, his roaring voice, drove them back to work. Then, in the throb of the engine, pulsing again, in the clank of the hand pump, Nelson had his answer. He had won.

A long hour passed. Then, out of the west, came the whistle of a tug, hauling down on them, eager for work. The hand pump stopped; men crowded the starboard rail to watch the tug come up. And Case, hatless, coatless and dirty, slowly drew himself erect. He looked around him—at Summers' body, at the crew, at Nelson, at the tug.

Then, with a steady tread, he walked aft, toward the poop, and something in his posture tensed Nelson, drowned the exultation that had been welling through him. He saw that only now had Case given up the fight. Case paused, near the break of the poop, looked up at Nelson.

"You appear to have won, captain," he said, in his flawless, sardonic English. "You seem to have won. You'll get your picture in the papers. You'll get a fat check from the Board of Marine Underwriters. You'll have the pleasure of sending flowers to Mr. Summers' funeral."

He laughed again, went swiftly to the port rail, leaped upon it, and clung to the mizzen shrouds. Turning, he said: "But you won't get me into a federal prison!"

He raised a thin arm in a last salute; then he leaped. Nelson, running to the rail, saw bubbles arising. Case was forcing all the air out of his lungs, so that he could not rise. A long moment passed. Then Nelson saluted the bubbles, and in a queerly soft voice said:

"I told you, Case, that you might be wrong."



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• Detective

Hell Tracks of the Dragon



By
Jack Archer

"THAT'S funny," muttered Gilbert Flint to the silence of his dingy, furnished room; but there was no mirth in his frosty gray eyes, as he watched a touring sedan emerge from the swirling mists of Chinatown and pull to the curbing of Jackson Street.

His craggy, sun-tanned face tightened into angles that were accentuated by the sudden grimness of his mouth. Crouched

beside the sill of the fly-specked window that gave him a view from Stockton Street down to the Embarcadero, Gilbert Flint of the Federal Bureau of Investigation for a moment seemed to be a lurking tiger.

It was time to strike. Twice during his endless prowlings as a shabby drifter in Chinatown he had seen that six-wheel job pull up at the mouth of the alley that

The trail of the insidious Silver Dragon led G-Man Flint to a house of horror—and a beautiful woman with the eyes of Satan.

led to the rear of Yut Lee's "Abode of Felicitous Fraternal Association." And the third time confirmed his hunch that the Silver Dragon came to San Francisco by motor.

The same car, and the same driver; a hawk-nosed, swarthy man whose thin face, for a moment illuminated by the yellowish glow of the nearby electrolier, was deeply lined and haggard from hard driving. He stretched his lean, rangy body, then stepped to the side door of Yut Lee's place. He rang, and was at once admitted.

Flint reached for a wreck of a hat, slipped into a shapeless, tattered topcoat, and resumed the role he had for a moment cast off. He bit off a chew of Battle Axe and shambled down the two flights of creaking stairs.

If a Chinaman emerged from the alley to remove the spare wheels from the fender wells, Flint wanted to be within arm's reach. Those tires—unless his hunch was wrong—would be filled with more than air.

He wondered how many five-*tael* tins of opium each inner tube could conceal. He wondered also what master smuggler was flooding San Francisco with Silver Dragon, the new brand that was forcing the old ones out of the market.

Flint slouched up, crossed Jackson, and ducked into an intersecting alley not far from the parked sedan. He entered a gloomy doorway and ascended a flight of stairs. On the second floor hall he lifted a window, cleared the sill, and emerged on a balcony that overhung the court in the rear of Yut Lee's place.

While the Abode of Felicitous Fraternal Association was the center of the local opium traffic, Flint had larger game in view—the smuggling ring that supplied Yut Lee. The Chinatown squad, complying with a request from federal headquarters, arrested just enough peddlers and hop-heads to avoid a suspicion-arousing lull.

Across the court was a window, a blot of yellow glow in the gloom. Flint was looking into the inside of Chinatown. Lean, grizzled Yut Lee was earnestly

conversing with a girl whose loveliness caught Flint's breath. She was not Chinese; and he doubted that she was Eurasian. Her blue-black hair was drawn sleekly back and caught in a lustrous cluster at the nape of her neck. Cream-colored skin, and dark eyes perilously smoldering behind curled lashes; just a glimpse, but an unforgettable one.

A door silently swung into the murky gloom below. A Chinaman emerged. His felt slippers *swish-swished* as he shuffled across the flagstones. Same old routine. Haul the spares in, one at a time; then later, come out with other tires.

The Chinaman fumbled with keys. A latch click—but as the door to the street opened, the Chinaman froze for an instant. Then his hand darted forward, sending a silvery streak zipping on ahead of him. Screeching wrathfully, he drew another knife and bounded toward the street. That opened the show.

Flint, clearing the balcony railing, heard the tinkle of steel and the answering yell. He dropped to the shadows of the court, rocked for an instant on the balls of his feet to regain his balance. But instead of rising, he rolled back and to the shelter of a pilaster. The Abode of Felicitous Fraternal Association was waking up.

The hawk-nosed driver of the parked car came plunging into the court. As he reached the street, a pistol cracked. Lead thudded into the door. Wild shots spattered to whining fragments against the brick wall at the rear. A yell, and the sodden thud of a man dropping to the paving.

Hawk-nose, ducking to the shelter of the jamb, cursed wrathfully and snapped an automatic into line. The blast of his heavy pistol drowned the spiteful rattle that came from beyond his parked car, but flame still streaked over the hood.

Flint caught it at a glance. Rival opium dealers were rising in revolt against the monopoly of Silver Dragon. One spare wheel lay on the sidewalk where the hijacker had dropped it to take cover as the Chinaman emerged from the court.

"*Cabron!*" roared Hawk-nose above

the thunder of his .45, then shifted to get a better line of fire.

His maneuver was good. Another shot, and the enemy's fusillade ceased. Hawk-nose bounded from cover. Sirens were screaming in the distance, and in another few moments the Chinatown squad would appear to mop up the disturbance. The iron gratings of windows opening into the court of Yut Lee's place were slamming shut; and when the police appeared, bland faced Orientals would be insisting: "No savvee . . ."

Wisely enough, Yut Lee's highbinders were not taking a hand. There was no use. The car parked at the curb was Hawk-nose's funeral, not theirs.

Hawk-nose was losing no time. Even as the wounded hijacker dropped gurgling and groaning to the street, the opium runner leaped to the wheel.

Flint emerged from cover. Getting the license plate number was not enough. That would be changed; but by riding the rear bumper, he could flag some traffic cop to tail the machine. But both Flint and the opium runner miscalculated.

Before Hawk-nose could jab the starter, a dark form jerked up from behind the front seat to meet him. A hand snaked up, striking aside his automatic, and a curved blade lashed upward. There had been two hijackers, one working on each fender well. And the one at the left had played a cunning game.

The interior of the car became a tangle of writhing bodies and grappling hands, and a relentlessly flickering blade that darted in and out of the confusion. Hawk-nose sagged to the floorboards.

Flint bounded to the running board. The hijacker, a short, stocky Chinaman, kicked clear of his wounded adversary and lunged to meet him. Flint plowed in, his left hand catching the highbinder's wrist and deflecting his dripping blade, his fist popping home. The Chinaman, dazed but still kicking, sagged across the steering column.

Before Flint could regain his balance, the parked car began rolling down grade. The emergency had been disengaged in the tussle. He jerked back, but the highbinder blocked his attempt to leap clear. The knife descended. Flint wriggled clear. Its red length stabbed the upholstery.

Flint drew his knee up to his stomach to boot the highbinder through the windshield—but gravity and the steep grade

had been at work. The now swiftly, erratically descending car backed over the low curbing, and crashed into an entrance a door from Grant Avenue. The impact pitched the highbinder and Flint to the paving. They came up fighting. A blade raked Flint from shoulder to hip. He jerked aside, struggled to his feet. Another vicious jab. Flint feinted, ducked inside the highbinder's guard, planting him squarely on the jaw.

Hawk-nose, aroused by the shock that flung him from the floorboards, lashed out blindly with both arms.

The riot ended with a savage yell, a gurgle and a gasp. Flint saw that the high-binder had impaled himself on his own blade.

Hawk-nose was still alive, though the ever-widening pool of blood through which he was trying to crawl left his chances in the balance.

"Take it easy, Jack," cautioned Flint, kneeling beside the wounded man. "You got them both. I'll give you a lift—which way?"

Hawk-nose muttered, gestured vaguely as Flint lifted him from the paving. The car, despite its rear end crash, was worth a trial.

And then the Chinatown squad came pounding into action. Flint swallowed an oath, and obeyed the brusque command to surrender.

"Jeez, chief," he whined, resuming his pose as a drifter, "I don't know nuthin' about this. I was just helpin' this guy to his feet—"

"You look like it," growled the sergeant, eyeing Flint's knife-tattered coat and battered face. "Now shut up, or do I have to sock you?"

"Take it easy, cap," countered Flint. "Can't you give a fellow a break? I didn't have nuthin' to do with this, but the Chinks'll be waiting for me when I get out of the jug—"

"They'll be old men before you get out," barked the sergeant. "Now get into that wagon."

Flint risked a whisper as the police hustled him toward the department car. "Grab that spare tire halfway up the block!"

The sergeant glanced up Jackson Street.

"Spare tire!" he growled. "Try another one, fella!"

It was gone, but one still remained in the left fender well.

"Get that—"

But the Chinatown squad is hardened to artful dodges. Flint, now that his investigation had blown up, would have to start all over again, and he dared not continue the argument.

The next instant justified him. A blot of whiteness appeared from a second story window; then a pale, slender jewel-sparkling hand swept out. A burning cigarette lighter landed in the pool of gasoline collecting under the crushed tank. A roar, a fierce wave of heat, and a surging gust of flame enveloped Hawk-nose's car.

Flint cursed wrathfully as the police machine pulled out. Before that blaze was extinguished, not a scrap of evidence would be left.

AT police headquarters Flint identified himself.

"Who is that hook-nosed guy, and will he live?" he asked.

"Henrique Robles, according to his driver's license," answered the sergeant. Then, after a moment on the telephone, he added: "They tell me he coughed himself to death on the operating table. The rest were cold meat before we got to headquarters. Three highbinders. Yut Lee, of course, claims he never saw the Chink that went out to get the spare tires—or the others that tried to beat him to it. Which is pure baloney. If there's not a tong war before morning, my name's not McDermott!"

"Worse than a tong war," grumbled Flint. "Damn sight worse! Anyone big enough to crowd the other brands off the market is not going to confine himself to opium.

"Hitting the pipe is comparatively harmless, especially for a Chink. The damnable thing about it is that this Silver Dragon won't stick to smoking opium. Deadlier drugs will follow. The kind that get at the white population."

McDermott's ruddy face lengthened. Flint's view had made a murderous tong war seem trivial in comparison.

While waiting for news of the exotic girl he had glimpsed at Yut Lee's place—the one he was certain had ignited Robles' car—Flint proposed inspecting the wreck.

They went. "Hawk-nose" Robles' ma-

chine was in the pound. The blackened remains mocked Flint. The blast of the half emptied tank had sprayed it with blazing gasoline. He drew a jackknife and moved toward the still smoking wreck.

The hijackers had been interrupted before they could break the lock of the tire in the left fender well. A slash, and the blistered rubber yielded. Flint's hunch was confirmed when he tore into the tube: it was filled with five-*tael* tins of Silver Dragon, each held in place with a rubber band vulcanized to the interior. But that confirmation was thus far useless.

The serial number had long been filed from the engine block, and no body number plate remained. The gutted interior was a total blank. Flame and the fire department had destroyed the ownership papers on the steering column.

"At the speed this guy was driving," said McDermott eyeing the insect-caked radiator, "he'd have to gas up about every hundred seventy-five miles. Watch towns that distance—"

"This is better!" interrupted Flint, abruptly checking his examination of the interior of the car. He pried a small metal plate from above the right corner of the windshield. "Somebody slipped!"

It was a greasing rack "tickler" with blank spaces for the speedometer reading at which oil should be changed and the chassis relubricated. The top of the plate was marked in red enamel *Timothy's Service Station—Yuma.*

"Bulleye!" exclaimed McDermott. "That short circuits the guesswork. Now we know where to inquire. First stop for gas, Fresno, hundred and eighty miles south. Then the all-night filling station at Mojave, three fifty-five. And Yuma—"

"Is headquarters," Flint broke in. "Close to the Mexican border. This tickler's never been marked. Probably not even Robles knew it was there. He'd grease up each round trip. Routine."

Flint then briskly ordered: "Get some mechanics to work on this heap. Fix it up with a used body the same color. I'm driving it south."

"Hell!" muttered McDermott. "You can't get away with impersonating Hawk-nose Robles! And the big shot—the Silver Dragon—ten to one knows by this time what's happened."

Flint's mouth relaxed almost to a smile. "McDermott, if it's got you guessing, this gag may catch some one else off

guard. But unless I hit fast, I'll pile right into a buzz-saw. Shake it up. This is big stuff."

Flint, while waiting for the police to have Robles' sedan restored, listened to the radio network enveloping the Peninsula: but the incoming reports were a succession of blanks.

He returned to the pound. The mechanics were checking up the restoration.

"Put some bullet holes into the hood," he ordered, approvingly eyeing the second-hand replacement body. "Radio the highway patrols down the San Joaquin to give me a clear block, and tell the small town speed traps to lay off. I'm going through."

"And while you're waiting for the radio in Yuma, find that black-haired jane with a quart of diamonds on her fingers and hell in her eyes. Just maintain contact, under cover. But don't grab her. She's been loose too long for a pinch to be any good. The beans must be spilled by now. She'll be worth more on the hoof than in the jug."

HALF an hour later the revamped car was hoisted bodily into a waiting truck. In a side street just short of the South San Francisco bottle neck, Flint took the wheel and nosed the powerful machine down the tail gate ramp and to the pavings.

Yuma is sprawled on the east bank of the sluggish Colorado. Its dobe shacks and broad, dusty streets were replaced by granite and marble and asphalt when the Chamber of Commerce used the winter sunshine as tourist bait; hence the modern hotels, schools like Moorish palaces, and a post office that covers a quarter of the city. Yuma is the biggest small town in the country—or maybe it's the smallest big town.

Flint headed for Timothy's Filling Station. Six hundred and seventy miles in a little over ten hours, and the car looked it.

"Give her the works, doc," Flint ordered.

Despite his careless tone and the amiable grin that cracked the alkali dust coating of his craggy face, he was tensely watching the effect of his appearance.

The sandy-haired attendant's blue eyes narrowed as his glance shifted from Flint to the car, and the bullet holes in the hood. No doubt that the machine was familiar:

but there was little chance that the attendant would know enough about Robles' business to be on guard.

"Robles got hurt," Flint remarked. "He tried to tell me who to get in touch with, but he passed out before I could get it. Know any of his friends?"

"Don't know anything about him, cap," was the answer. "But there's a fellow that drives up here with him, once in a while. Professer Kane—the fortune teller. Maybe you could find him in the phone directory."

Flint found that Alexander Kane was listed. That was something to work on.

"I'll be back for the grease job later," said Flint, resuming the wheel.

But just in case the man at the filling station knew more than he seemed to, Flint rounded the corner, pulled up at a drug store, and called the telephone supervisor.

"Watch all calls going out of Timothy's Service Station," he ordered. "And report Alexander Kane's phone out of order. Police business."

Then he hastened to police headquarters. He arrived just in time to hear the sergeant at the desk rasp into the transmitter: "We don't know anything about that order—"

"You do now, sergeant," Flint cut in, flashing a federal badge. "Tell the phone supervisor to go ahead with it, and I'll explain a few things."

The order was confirmed; and presently he was conferring with Chief Fergus McDonald, lean and erect as the desert sahuaros, and just about as thorny.

"What's the dirt on this fortune teller, Kane?" he asked, after sketching the trail of the Silver Dragon.

"As far as we've had any occasion to know," answered McDonald, "he's just one of those pests that stay inside the law. He came to town six months ago, and there haven't been any complaints."

"I'm going to look him up," announced Flint.

ALEXANDER KANE'S squat, thick-walled, old-fashioned dobe house was a brown cube surrounded by an uncultivated grove of grapefruit trees. Though not far from the southern limits of the city, it was aloof, and isolated from the neighboring places.

A dusty drive, winding in and out among the trees, led to a sunbaked yard

fringed by flame-crested ocatillas and tall, towering sahuaros. At the right of the flat-roofed dobe was a stack of fire wood, lying as though just unloaded from a truck whose tire tracks were still plain in the yard.

Flint jabbed the pushbutton just below the brass plate that was etched, *Alexander Kane, Psychic*. No answer.

He circled the house. The professor's car was in the open garage. He returned to the stone slab at the threshold. Another futile ring. Then Flint went in. For a moment the cool dimness of the spacious room was too much for eyes dazzled by the outdoor glare. It was not until Flint had passed the table at the center that he perceived the thin, saw-toothed man who lay sprawled on the Spanish tiles. He had fallen, struggled to his knees, then slumped to his right. Life had ended with that last effort.

The flow from the dark splash on his gray coat, just below the shoulder, had made little progress across the tiles. His thin, pain-raked face was a mask of futile wrath, made grotesque by the froth that had drooled from his lips as he gasped out his life. Dried, blackened blood—he had been dead for hours.

Flint knelt beside the body, deftly probed an inside coat pocket and found a wallet. A glance at the contents identified the corpse as Alexander Kane.

"He might have been psychic," muttered Flint, "but not enough to keep from turning his back to the wrong guy."

Death had sought Kane with a smile and a knife. No mistaking that vengeful grimace; and the table runner, jerked awry, confirmed Flint's opinion. The psychic had died trying to reach his telephone. Another step, another moment of life, and he would have lived to speak a familiar name into the transmitter.

None of the living-room furniture had been disturbed. Then Flint noted that the trail of blood led to the rear. He followed it down the hallway. At his right was a door that opened into a room whose stucco walls were hung with astrological charts. In the center was a broad, flat-topped walnut desk on which were set, between brazen sphinxes, half a dozen occult books.

Without entering, Flint continued tracking the blood splashes in the hallway. They led to the kitchen, and came from a trapdoor opening into a cellar. He

descended a short flight of wooden stairs, found and snapped a switch.

"Hell's bells!" he exclaimed, noting the open door of a wall cabinet.

On one shelf were ten five-*tael* tins of Silver Dragon. On a table were several inner tubes, slit to receive their cargo.

FLINT, examining the hot-patch kit use in vulcanizing the cans of opium to the inner tubes, saw that the psychic had been preparing to conceal fifty five-*tael* containers. Forty were missing; and if it was hijacking, why leave ten?

Flint retraced his steps, but this time he paused in the kitchen. It was large, neat, but scantily furnished—a shelf stocked with canned goods; a refrigerator and a gas plate. In an alcove were two chairs, and a dinette table.

The latter had not been cleared. There were two plates, both coated with a greasy, congealed, reddish brown gravy; and cups that contained coffee dregs. A bowl at the center was a third filled with *frijoles* and *chili con carne*. Beside it lay a heel of bread and a square of butter.

He sniffed the *chili*. Home made. The real article.

But before he could look for some definite trace left by the unknown guest, Flint heard a muffled groan, as though some one, handicapped by a gag, were making an effort to call for help. He turned. It was repeated, choked and gurgling.

It must come from the mystic's study, but he could not be certain. No—it originated in the basement. The silence of the thick walled dobe had an uncanny trick of distorting sound.

He paused, waiting for a recurrence of that deceptive cry of distress. He heard a sharp click as though a latch had either opened or engaged. No doubt about its origin. Regardless of prisoners, some one was on the prowl. Flint, pistol in hand, stretched long, stealthy strides toward the study door. Weapon leveled, he halted, peeped warily into the room.

It was empty. Nevertheless he sensed that he was by no means alone in that sinister dobe. The groan was repeated. Flint was certain now that some one must be beyond the door which opened from the study into an adjoining room.

Pistol still ready, he cleared the threshold; but as he bounded forward to reach

the knob of the interior door, it jerked open to meet him. Simultaneously, something tripped him in midstride and a stick cracked down across his right forearm. His automatic slipped from numb fingers; yet swift as his headlong plunge was, he caught a glimpse of the short, moon-faced Chinaman who had lurked at the blind side of Kane's desk.

Only a flickering glimpse, as he desperately struggled to regain his balance: an unnaturally stolid, immobile face whose only animated features were the eyes, black fires that blazed in that frozen, yellowish mask.

Then, slipping on the tiles, Flint's efforts to regain his feet sent him plunging headlong across the threshold and into the darkness from which the choking sounds had come.

A dove wall checked his lunge. Rebounding, he whirled to a crouch. But the door slammed, and a bolt snicked home. The solid panels fairly crushed his shoulder as he hurled himself against them.

Silence, except for his own hoarse breathing. He struck a match. He was caged in a cramped, dusty closet. The Chinaman, crouched at the blind side of Kane's desk, had by simple ventriloquism thrown his voice so that it seemed to come from beyond the door. And Flint had taken the bait.

His hands were slick and greasy, and so were his knees.

Butter! Taken from the square in the kitchenette.

No wonder he had floundered on those tiles. And peeping through the keyhole, he caught a glimpse of a strand of wire on the floor of the study. That was what had tripped him.

He shifted and saw that blank face averted as yellow hands opened desk drawers and probed the contents. Without waiting to see what the raider was taking, Flint turned his back to the door. He braced himself against the knob, planted his feet against the closet wall, and heaved.

The panels creaked as he slowly straightened his arched body. He heard a soft, mocking laugh. Another heave, and then Flint settled to the floor. There, lying on his side, he could apply pressure.

But the groan of the wood was followed by the *slip-slip-swish* of shuffling feet and the locking of the outer door. And

when the tongue of the lock finally tore the socket from the jamb, Flint was alone in a littered office. Escape was blocked by an iron-barred window and a door as strong as the first.

His gun was on the desk, every cartridge removed.

As he snatched a chair and began belabouring the remaining barrier, he wondered at the insane inconsistency of it all. Why such an elaborate trap when the Chinaman could have stabbed or brained him as he responded to ventriloquist's bait?

FLINT finally shouldered his way through the shattered panel. Although he knew that his captor had made good his escape, he nevertheless dashed to the front.

Robles' touring sedan was still there; but the top of the trunk at the rear was now braced open. Three prints of felt-soled slippers had registered before the emerging stowaway had reached the harder ground at the house. There were no tracks to show what direction the Chinaman had taken in flight from the dobe.

"That Chink followed me from 'Frisco!" muttered Flint.

In trying to outwit the enemy, he had carried one of the Silver Dragon's men with him for nearly seven hundred miles. Flint grimaced wryly and gave the sinking sensation at the pit of his stomach a chance to subside. Then he cursed wrathfully and strode back into the house.

"Funny," he pondered, stepping to the telephone to call the police, "that Kane didn't have this instrument in his office instead of out here."

He mentioned only having found the dead soothsayer. But as he started to the rear to resume his interrupted search, he heard a car coming up the driveway.

Flint turned again to the front.

A tall, swarthy man with a waxed black mustache emerged; a Spaniard or a Mexican. He carried a black leather bag.

Flint met him at the door.

"I am looking for Professor Kane," the caller announced. He was sleek and well groomed, and his purposeful dark eyes regarded Flint with sharp, querying scrutiny as he added: "Tell him that Dr. Alvarez is here."

"Did he call you?"

"Does it matter?" the doctor countered.

Flint suddenly stepped aside and gestured. He sharply watched Alvarez to note his reaction when his eyes accommodated themselves to the abrupt change from outdoor glare to indoor shadows.

Alvarez stared for a moment, then exclaimed and recoiled. He fixedly regarded the gray huddle just beyond the table, and the blood that blackened the tiles. Then, voice level and unwavering, he queried: "You found him this way?"

"How long has he been dead?" Flint asked.

Alvarez knelt, frowned and muttered under his breath. Finally, he arose, fumbled with his watch, stroked his mus-

tache, and announced: "One couldn't say except roughly, without an autopsy. But—" he glanced again at his watch—"I'd judge he was killed around six o'clock last night."

"Thanks, doc," acknowledged Flint. "Stick around until the sergeant gets here. He'll want to ask you a few things—"

"I'm afraid," deplored Alvarez, "that I won't be able to help much."

"We'll worry about that," said Flint.

Alvarez seated himself, fumbled for a match; then without hesitation strode to the far corner of the room to get a smoking stand. He evidently knew his way about the house.

McDonald, accompanied by the homicide squad, presently arrived; and as the medical examiner and fingerprint man set to work, the chief questioned Alvarez.

"Professor Kane," began the doctor, "has been my patient for the past six months. I called on him at irregular hours most adaptable to my time. Either around noon, or in the evening. I live right next



door, you know." His gesture indicated the northern side of the citrus grove.

"Did you see anyone call here last night, around six-seven?"

"Naturally not," answered Alvarez. "The grove doesn't permit me a view from my windows. Furthermore, Simon Carter—of Carter, Quentin and Carter—was dining with me. Thus, I'd not notice who approached the place."

McDonald nodded, asked a few routine questions as to the late Professor Kane's domestic arrangements, and habits, then added: "That's all, Dr. Alvarez. The coroner will want a statement later."

"Another blank!" grumbled Flint as Alvarez returned to his car. "Remarkable how little that guy knows about his patient! But let's look the joint over. I'm still wondering who was eating *chili* with Kane."

His second survey of the house yielded no new information; but the fingerprint man's findings gave significance to Flint's last question.

"Kane's prints are all over," he announced. "Except on the spoon next to that bowl on the other side of the table. And it's blank—wiped clean."

"How about the desk and that door knob?" Flint cut in. "Where the Chinaman was pawing around?"

"Wiped clean," was the answer.

McDONALD nodded, for a moment watched his men carry on with their routine, then said: "Flint, that drive of yours, following a busy day in San Francisco, isn't going to help a lot with what's ahead of you. Get yourself a nap, and this evening I'll have all the dope sorted out for you."

McDonald was right. Flint took the wheel of Robles' car. And as he passed Alvarez's house, which adjoined the abandoned grapefruit grove that surrounded Kane's place, he saw that the doctor could scarcely have noticed the psychic's callers.

That evening Flint reviewed the evidence McDonald presented.

Alvarez's story checked perfectly. The coroner confirmed the Spanish doctor's opinion as to the time of Kane's death.

"The old Mexican woman who comes in several times a week to clean the house," said McDonald, "made that batch of *chili*. Kane liked it. And he always ate early, around six. Rarely left the dobe

—naturally not, with the line he was running! Prepared his own meals. And according to the autopsy—based on undigested *frijoles* and *chili*—Kane was knocked off not long after he ate."

"That," growled Flint, "is damn helpful. But who wiped the spoon handles clean? And did that prowling Chink leave any marks?"

"Wait a minute!" McDonald broke in. "Till I tell you the rest. A Spick—Ramon Guevara—did odd jobs of gardening for Kane. Supplied him with cordwood for the fireplace. And peddled garden truck here and there in town."

"One of the neighbors saw Guevara in his Model-T truck heading down toward Kane's place with a load of wood. That was around six. And not long after he came out, empty."

"Have you located Guevara?"

"No," admitted McDonald. "He comes from San Cristobal, right across the Mexican line. The customs inspectors tell me he hasn't crossed today."

"And from now on he won't!" declared Flint. "So I'm going over to get him."

SAN CRISTOBAL was a collection of squat dobe shacks centering about *Estrella Blanca*: the White Star now agleam with light, blatant with music and laughter and the tinkle of glass.

Some one would know Ramon Guevara, and by now Flint had obtained a fairly good description of him.

Flint plunged into the smoke banded air, picked his way among the dancers, and found himself a booth where he could observe the White Star and its patrons. The bar was to his left. To the right was a side door opening into the desert night. It afforded a ready approach to the dobe shacks facing on the side street.

He eyed the crowd as he waited for his drink. He heard a woman in the booth behind him saying in Spanish: "Ramon, you're so unreasonably jealous! That pendant isn't a present. I bought it myself in San Francisco."

A wrathful muttering; and then, still tinged with suspicion, came Ramon's warning: "Oh, all right, you bought it! But listen, Valencia—if I ever find out you're lying to me, I'll take you to pieces by hand!"

Ramon and San Francisco were decidedly intriguing. Flint moved to another booth. That cut off his eavesdrop-

ping but it put him in line with a back-bar mirror which reflected the speakers. He saw more than he expected.

The man was tall and rangy. The heaviness of his swarthy, Indian features was relieved by a quartering of Latin blood. He was not much over thirty, and with his prominent nose and grim mouth he checked closely with the customs inspector's description of Ramon Guevara; but it was his companion who clinched it.

Valencia was the girl from Yut Lee's. She wore an acacia yellow sports ensemble, and entirely too many jewels, including a ruby pendant that blazed redly against her cream colored skin. But Flint, as he caught the reflection of those dark eyes and the heart stirring loveliness of her face and figure, noticed no clash in her costuming. It sufficed that this was the woman who had been conferring with the grizzled Chinaman who was the Silver Dragon's vicar in San Francisco.

But which of the two was really the most important: Valencia, or Ramon Guevara? Murder and tins of opium linked them both to Kane.

ANOTHER half hour of bickering, and they emerged from the booth to step toward the side door.

Flint headed for the main entrance and from the veranda watched them cross the side street that intersected the main stem of San Cristobal. Their destination was one of the dobe shacks in the center of the block; and if the wrangling became heated, it would be worth listening to.

Flint strode toward the barbed-wire International fence, then swung south to approach Valencia's house from the rear.

The quarrel directed Flint to a listening post at an open window of the living room. It was illuminated by a kerosene lamp. Valencia's colorful length was draped in a chair. Guevara turned to step into the adjoining room. He thrust aside Valencia's detaining hand. Before she could follow, there was a wrathful growl and he came bounding back.

His powerful hand gripped a plush-lined cardboard box.

"San Francisco!" he growled, thrusting it before her eyes. "I knew you were lying. This came from a jeweler in Yuma!"

Valencia ducked, but not quickly enough. Guevara's free hand sent her sprawling, a tangle of silken legs and

acacia yellow skirt. And then the Mexican dodged a flashing sliver of steel that Valencia plucked from a calf sheath.

Flint cleared the sill. Knife work had already thrown too many obstacles in his way.

"*Basta!*" he snapped. "Hold it!"

Guevara whirled, but his hand dropped from his hip as Flint's automatic jerked into line with his stomach.

"*Que hay?*" growled the Mexican.

"Back up to the wall, both of you!" commanded Flint. "Why did you kill Kane after you dumped that load of wood in his back yard?"

"I did not kill him!" flared Guevara.

Valencia's color perceptibly receded, but her eyes narrowed venomously. He was risking a parley solely on the chance that his surprise attack, coming on the heels of an interrupted quarrel, might result in an unguarded admission.

"Why did you go into the basement?" demanded Flint.

"I went to the office." Guevara started at the F.B.I. man's mention of the opium storage room. "Where he paid me for the wood."

"And you knifed him."

"I did not. I will prove it. While he was taking the money from the desk, some wan call heem and he reach for the telephone—"

"*He did what?*" Kane must have an unusually long arm.

"Reach for the telephone," repeated Guevara. Valencia stabbed him with a glance, but the Mexican continued: "He was expect' some wan to see heem later. He write something on the desk blotter."

"What does that prove?"

"That he was expect some wan later. Find out who it was! That weel prove he was alive w'en I leave. *Verdad?*"

Valencia's face had frozen. "Maybe it will," admitted Flint. "But the both of you take a walk with me. One on each side. And act natural. First sign of trouble from the White Star and you both get the works."

With arms folded, his left concealing the pistol that his right hand thrust against one prisoner, Flint could march them past the Mexican sentries at the International Line.

"All right, Valencia! *On my left.* Guevara, better be nice or you'll need a new girl friend. This is ladies' night."

The grimness of Flint's face warned

Guevara that the American would make good his threat.

"Understand?"

"Sí," breathed the Mexican.

"*'Sta 'ueno!*" Flint's clipped finality was steel hard.

He gestured for his prisoners to advance from the wall, but as they moved, he was warned by the perceptible shift of the Mexican's eyes. Instead of stepping into line with the door of Valencia's bedroom, he jerked back and risked a glance to his left.

The Chinaman who had trailed him from San Francisco was lunging from the doorway.

As Flint whirled to drop the Chinaman, Guevara snatched a smoking stand and struck the pistol from his grasp. The American, sidestepping the highbinder's charge, lashed out with his foot. The Chinaman tripped, crashing headlong against the leg of a table.

THAT gave Guevara time to close in with his smoking stand. The weapon smashed down on Flint's shoulder as he turned, but it landed an instant too late. Though momentarily paralyzed with pain, he had weight behind his fist. The impact froze the Mexican in his tracks.

Valencia, scrambling for Flint's pistol, reached it as Guevara's legs sagged. But before she could jerk the weapon into line, Flint booted the Mexican against her. They pitched over the threshold and into the bedroom. Flint followed through.

Valencia was knocked breathless by the impact. Guevara was out cold, but the blank-faced Chinaman was stirring. And then the front door crashed open. Two bouncers from *La Estrella Blanca* bounded into the room.

Flint's pistol cracked twice. One dropped kicking, the other was howling for help.

Guevara was too heavy to haul; and Valencia seemed more important than the highbinder. Before she recovered her breath, Flint rolled her up in a blanket, caught her in both arms, and dashed toward the back door.

A crowd was pouring from the side entrance of *La Estrella*, but being directed by the shouts of the bouncer who had escaped Flint's fire, they did not perceive his direction until he was close to the International fence.

One arm squeezed his slender captive

into submission as he halted and leveled his pistol. His erratically spattering slugs checked the pursuit long enough for him to slide his captive through the wire and dive after her.

He made it, with a length to spare. And once in a dry creek bed, he was out of sight. The customs guards on both sides, now aroused by the riot, would effectively block any pursuit.

Flint gagged his prisoner with a strip of his shirt, snapped a pair of handcuffs about her ankles, and left her where the dirt road dipped into the arroyo. That done, he dashed back to get his parked car.

Forty-five minutes later, Flint pulled up at the police station with his captive; but a patrol car had arrived just ahead of him. Two men in uniform were dragging a Mexican out of the wagon and carrying him to the desk. He was far beyond walking under his own power—dead drunk.

McDonald, still on the job, watched them search the prisoner.

"What have you got there?" Flint greeted.

"Too much *sotol*," explained a patrolman. "Making a good job of ganging up on the town and then it paralyzed him."

"Miguel Smith's the name," announced the other patrolman, digging a crumpled letter, a handful of change, and a pint bottle from the half breed's pockets.

"You'll like it here," Flint jibed as he saw Valencia's perceptible *moue*. "Better change your mind and talk."

"At that, it's better than your company!" she flared.

Finally they booked Valencia on suspicion.

"Last chance," Flint reminded her.

BUT the slam of the cell door drowned her retort. Flint turned to McDonald and gave his account of the raid.

"If I knew when she got here from 'Frisco," Flint concluded, "I might dope out how she figures in this jam. But—"

"I've already covered that," interrupted McDonald. "We've been checking up the trains, bus stations, and airport while you were in San Cristobal. Just to find out how much more of Chinatown traveled south."

"A girl checking up with Valencia's description landed at the airport about one A. M.—about four hours after the

riot broke out in Trisco. Her car was waiting. She'd parked it there when she flew north a couple days ago. And the inspector at San Cristobal says she didn't cross the line until nearly three A. M."

"That leaves an hour or so unaccounted for," Flint said. "If there's anything to Guevara's suspicions, she must have a



number two boy friend in Yuma—which might account for the missing hour."

"You mean Kane?"

"She might have found him dead," admitted Flint. "Valencia and Guevara didn't even pretend to be surprised when I sprung it on them. But neither of them seemed to know that that dead-pan Chinaman was prowling around in San Cris-

tobal. Guevara's startled look is what saved my hide, and—"

"But where does that lead you?" frowned McDonald.

"First the Chinaman was at Kane's place," explained Flint. "Then he pops up in Mexico, in her shack. As though he was checking upon Valencia and Guevara in connection with Kane's death. It's a cinch he couldn't have known I was going to be there."

McDonald conceded the significance of the mysterious lurker. Then, as Flint reached for his hat: "Calling it a day?"

"Hell, no! I'm going back to Kane's place. Guevara's gag about Kane being at his desk and reaching for a phone is so damn impossible that there must be something in it."

Ten minutes later Flint arrived at Kane's study. Drawer by drawer he examined the desk but found no hidden com-

partments. There were no dummy books in the cases; and after over an hour of thumping and measuring, he was convinced that the walls were solid. No chance of a concealed instrument.

The blank-faced Chinaman could have removed the desk blotter Guevara had mentioned, but he certainly could not have made away with an extension set.

From the living room came the tinkle of the telephone. Flint hastened to the front. McDonald was on the wire.

"Your prisoner checked out."

"What?"

"Yes. A bar sawed through. Miguel Smith — the bird we thought was paralyzed—is gone, too."

Flint swore. Valencia's disappearance confirmed his hunch as to her importance in the tangle.

"Why the hell call to tell me that?"

"So you won't be caught off guard," explained McDonald. "Remember, *that fake drunk was picked up before you brought Valencia to the station.* That dead-pan Chink worked fast to have her sprung.

"What luck you having?"

"Just like yours!" growled Flint, and slammed the receiver.

He returned to Kane's study to think it out. He finally shook his head, slumped back in the swivel chair, and swung away from the desk. His gesture of disgust ended in a jerk. There was something odd about the finish of that little patch of baseboard between the ends of the two book cases along the left wall. A squarish blot showed beneath the varnish.

In an instant he was on his knees. A fixture had been removed from the baseboard of the lathe-and-plaster partition that now subdivided the original rooms of the old adobe into a more modern arrangement.

Then he found puttied screw holes, and one through which wires could have been run.

Flint dashed to the front. Flashlight in hand, he skirted the dobe. He traced the wires of the telephone still in service. There was no sign of tampering.

A trip to the cellar gave him the next lead.

Wedge between the original dirt floor of the house and the wooden floor that had been installed in modernizing it he found three dry cells with wires that rose to the wooden floor above. They

led to the left wall of the study. Then he distinguished, further back, almost beyond the reach of his flashlight beam, a weatherproof cable which, leaving that same partition, sank at an easy angle into the thick foundation of sun-baked bricks.

No doubt that that was what remained of a telephone set-up; a private, local circuit of the kind used between the apartments of a building, or between house and garage.

He now understood the removal of the telephone. It had been a connecting link between Kane's study and the chief of the opium smuggling ring.

The Silver Dragon could not be far away; three dry cells would not carry for more than two thousand feet. Flint returned to the surface. He circled the house, inch by inch, scrutinizing the hard packed earth. Whoever had buried that line could not at the time have anticipated the necessity of removing it to block an investigation; and Kane's residence at the *dobe* had not been long enough for time to conceal the trench.

Yet the flashlight glow revealed not a trace.

Flint's jaw set stubbornly. You can't bury a cable without leaving a trace. The damn thing was there. It must lead to the Silver Dragon.

Then a white blot in the gloom at the edge of the grove caught his eye. It was the concrete lip of the underground irrigation tiles that honeycombed the citrus grove. Far down the dusky aisle his flash beam picked up another outlet that once had gushed an eight-inch stream of water.

"Got it!"

FLINT bounded toward the nearest outlet. But the tongue of light he flashed down the tube touched only a bare bottom.

He looked again. The wall of the vertical riser had not been pierced near the bottom. An obliquely drilled hole, not a trench, had led the line to the long unused aqueduct.

Whoever had cut and pulled the cable could not have foreseen that Ramon Guevara's efforts to clear himself would uncover the trick.

"North—toward Alvarez' place," muttered Flint as he regained his feet.

Flint set out on foot for Alvarez' house. Despite the hour, the lights were

on. The doctor himself came to the door. His greeting was suave, but his dark eyes expressed his unspoken query.

"Sorry to bother you, doctor," beamed Flint as he crossed the threshold, "but I'd like to use your phone. Yeah, I've been switched to the Kane case. The company disconnected the wire next door."

"A pleasure to oblige you," assured Alvarez.

Flint followed him through a vestibule and into an ornately furnished living room. A cigarette was fuming from the edge of a smoking stand at the arm of a chair just in front of an all-wave radio.

"In the next room, Mr. Flint," directed Alvarez. But Flint's pause had been long enough for him to note that the radio dial was set for police wavelengths.

On the mahogany desk of the doctor's residence office was a single telephone. Flint had not expected to find two; but his stall would give him a chance to look for the marks left by a recently removed instrument.

"Make yourself at home," Alvarez continued. "There's a directory—and let me give you some more light."

As he spoke, he stepped forward to reach for the chain of the desk lamp. It blazed to life. Flint, picking the telephone handset from its cradle, saw the doctor pluck an oversize fountain pen from the blotting pad.

Too late, he caught the meaning of the left-handed gesture. A blinding, choking jet of vapor hissed from the black cylinder. Tear gas.

Something had warned Alvarez.

BEFORE Flint could reach for his pistol, an uncontrollable cough and a devastating sneeze racked his entire body. He could not force his hand to his weapon. The involuntary catch of breath that followed drew in a gulp of the hissing vapor.

It was more than tear gas. It was a searing and corrosive narcotic. His head was already spinning, and his legs were sagging. One more gulp of that deadly vapor and he would be out. For an age-long instant, he fought the spasm that would have drawn in the finishing breath of the drugging mixture. He flung himself aside—anything to get clear of that hissing poison.

As he plunged out of that venomous cloud, a racking sneeze jerked every fibre

of his body. Somehow, he forced his hand to his pistol butt. The effort was wasted. Before the weapon cleared the holster, an attack from his right knocked him from his feet.

A curved knife, and a blank, yellow face identified Alvarez' ally. There would be no betraying pistol fire to make the execution conspicuous.

The blade swept down. But that last inhalation of diluted gas stirred Flint's muscles to a spasm that no conscious effort could have equaled. The descending point nailed his arm instead of sinking hilt-deep into his chest. The shock of that biting steel prodded his whirling senses.

The knife rose again—but Flint's free hand jerked his pistol clear.

The blast was muffled by the yellow flesh it riddled. The Chinaman jerked back, then slumped forward. His wild thrust stabbed the floor. His dead weight pinioned Flint.

Flinging aside the now emptied gas tube, Alvarez closed in before Flint could extricate himself or disengage his pistol. The doctor knocked the weapon from his hand, but as they grappled, the concentration of oily fumes thinned into an agonizing mist that leveled off the odds.

The office became a hazy nightmare. Tear-blinded, sneezing, gasping, racked by coughs and seared by lung-corroding gulps of tainted air, they rolled and kicked and slugged.

Flint, almost overwhelmed during those first instants, saw red spots dance before his eyes, and steel-bright flashes that became raking cuts. The doctor must have seized the Chinaman's knife. He was no longer certain, but that warm flood that ran down his ribs and legs must be blood.

Voice in that murderous maze—Alvarez yelling—and then a drowning, dry voice, like pebbles rattling in a gourd.

"Calling all cars! Miguel Smith—Mexican Mike—wanted for the murder of Ramon Guevara—heading for Telegraph Pass in a blue sedan . . ."

McDonald broadcasting to the prowlers cars and highway patrol. Miguel Smith—engineered Valencia's jailbreak and—

Another slash. That one didn't hurt. Nothing hurt. He found a man's throat and hung on. His fingers were weakening. So was Alvarez. Maybe his teeth would do the trick—got to get a look at that Chink's blank face.

Then a shriek. A low, tigerish feminine cry—vibrant with wrath.

Some woman was helping Alvarez. But another stab wouldn't hurt. Let her help—

He felt Alvarez' sagging muscles perk taut and become iron. Flint lost his grip. Then he heard a strangled, gurgling cry. As he struggled to regain his hold, the doctor slumped to the floor, still clutching a knife.

What followed was a hazy confusion seen through streaming eyes. Flint crawled toward the droning radio. A woman was weeping with rage and grief.

And as Flint gulped in clean air, he saw her lying in a huddled heap on the divan near the radio. A dripping stiletto was clenched in her red hand.

Valencia.

Flint slowly began to understand why she had not stabbed him. It wasn't a mistake, knifing the doctor.

"Yes. I came to help him, that dirty —" The next few words choked her. "Then I heard that police call. Miguel was one of Alvarez' crowd. Got me out of jail and brought me here. So I knew that Alvarez had tricked Ramon back across the line to give him the works."

"Afraid that Ramon Guevara might be tripped up and spill some beans?"

"Maybe," said Valencia. "But mainly jealousy. That rat over there probably told him how Ramon and I stood. I didn't care for Alvarez."

"And I don't care what you do with me. Ramon's dead."

"How'd he fit into things?"

"He smuggled the stuff across the line to Kane's place, concealed in loads of vegetables and firewood."

The arrangement was characteristic. Guevara, Kane and Robles ran the risks of actual handling. Alvarez supervised by remote control. And Valencia, when not in Mexico, maintained contact with Yut Lee in San Francisco.

Then Flint remembered the blank-faced Chinaman. He turned back to the office, flung open a window, and as the lingering fumes thinned, he knelt beside the Asiatic hoodoo. A moment's intent scrutiny ex-

plained the facial immobility—a snugly fitting, life-like rubber mask.

He jerked it clear, exposing the face of lean, grizzled Yut Lee — the Silver Dragon, who had come to Yuma to take charge.

"Who killed Kane?" Flint demanded.

She gestured toward Alvarez.

"He's got forty tins of Silver Dragon. He never kept the stuff in his house before. Figure it out yourself."

And that did not take long. Flint remembered the two bowls of *chili* and began to see their possibilities. He stepped to the telephone and called McDonald.

"I've got it, Mac." Then, after covering his discovery of the private wire, he continued, "Alvarez killed Kane after Valencia arrived from 'Frisco . . . I don't give a damn about the autopsy. Suppose Alvarez dropped in to see Kane about two a.m. to talk shop and have some coffee and a plate of home-made *chili*. Then knifed Kane."

"The autopsy would show he died shortly after eating. And with everyone taking it for granted Kane always ate around six, the alibi was holeproof."

"Why kill Kane? Nobody could be sure Robles died in 'Frisco before he had a chance to mutter while coming out of the ether. Knifing Kane and leaving ten cans of hop for us to find would make us think we had cleaned up the mob. And it would have worked if Guevara hadn't tried to prove he didn't kill Kane."

And then McDonald wondered why Yut Lee had not used his first chance to dispose of Flint.

"Simple, Mac. Bum play, blotting me out before he had a chance to find out just how much the D.J. really did know. Having Alvarez drop in was like getting a ringside seat."

He listened a moment, and as McDonald's voice burred over the wire, Flint eyed Valencia. Finally he answered: "The girl got away during the riot. We've got nothing on her. She was never caught smuggling hop. Anyway, the Silver Dragon is cold meat."



Mystery Range



By Cliff Howe

"Big Plenty" Ruff found himself the gun-target of warring ranchers seeking the answer to a pistol puzzle. Big Plenty decided to find out all about it—and stuck his neck into a hemp noose.

THE Green River brakes of southwestern Utah made hot, lonely riding in August. Hardly a thing moved but the heat waves.

So when undersized Oscar "Big Plenty" Ruff slid off his buckskin bronc to get a drink at a waterhole, trouble was the last thing he expected.

It gave Ruff a shock to have a man jump from the concealment of a sagebrush clump and land feet-first on the small of his back.

The impact mashed Ruff into shallow water and gray mud like a stepped-on frog. His enraged, surprised squawk was a bubbling explosion. He drove his right

hand hipward—did not complete the gesture when he felt his Frontier .45 stripped from the leather.

He rolled, flopping like a half-landed catfish. His fists flailed. One struck some part of a man—his eyes were too full of mud to tell what part. Cursing in a loud, braying voice, the assailant leaped clear.

"Cut it out, banty!" he snarled.

Ruff dropped to all fours, jammed his head into the water, shook it violently to wash mud out of his eyes. He glared at his attacker.

"C'mon out of your puddle, froggy!" directed the man.

He was big and solidly fat, one of the

biggest men Ruff had ever seen. His dusty, faded clothes fitted him like skin on an elephant. His keg of a face was dourly expressionless, his small eyes alert and aglitter. His left hand held a single-action Colt.

"I'll froggy you!" Ruff gritted. "What's the idea?"

"The idea is that I got a cryin' need for your cayuse, peewee," rumbled the giant. "Not wantin' an argument, figured I'd just step on your spine an' peel your ironware. C'mon outa there!"

Ruff grimaced rage like a wet, mad bulldog. Under the turbid water his fingers curled, scooping up fistfuls of mud. "You're gonna freeze to my buckskin, eh? Plain hoss rustler!"

"You got a crust, runt!" The giant jutted his Colt forward a couple of inches. "I oughta salivate you. But I'll tie you across the saddle an' take you to the sheriff. The law'll handle you—and your pards, too. The sheriff o' this county ain't finicky. He'll work on you until you tell where you're holdin' old Zeke McCann."

Ruff blinked, blew muddy water off his lips. "I don't know you. I'm just a ranny siffin' through. Name's Oscar Ruff—Big Plenty Ruff. Reckon you're makin' a mistake?"

"Big Plenty Ruff ain't rough enough," chuckled the giant. "You tryin' to tell me you don't work for Stan Yonkel's Boxed-Y?"

"Never heard of the spread."

"I ain't seen you among the Boxed-Y hands, at that." The giant worked his huge shoulders. "Well, I ain't takin' chances. You'd lie, anyhow. Looks like you jaspers will do anythin' to get hold o' that Devil's Ear."

"Devil's Ear—what's that?"

"You'll find out when I get you to the sheriff. Quit lallygaggin'! Get outa that mudhole!"

"I ain't no Boxed-Y hand. Look at the brand on my cayuse."

"That don't prove nothin'. You're probably a gun-slinger Stan Yonkel's foreman, Silky Ed Crowder, brought in from somewhere."

Then the giant did what Ruff had hoped for—he looked at the buckskin. "Nope. Ain't branded Boxed-Y, but that don't—"

Ruff threw both fistfuls of mud. The stuff splattered the giant's face, blinding him. Before the man recovered Ruff was out of the water and had kicked his gun arm. The .45 flipped upward without exploding.

Ruff leaped, trying to catch it. But the giant managed to lash out a foot

instinctively and trip him. Snarling, the fellow leaped.

Twisting onto his back, Ruff drove both high-heeled boots into the giant's middle. The man lost air out of his lungs with a gusty roar. They tangled in a gouging, mauling pile.

"You little snort!" labored the big man. "You sure raise a stew for your size!"

Muddy water worked down out of Ruff's bristling hair into his eyes. He tried to rub it out, saw a fist coming—and the world exploded.

RUFF did not lose consciousness. But for several seconds his arms and legs were limp as worn hackamore ropes. When he was able to see, the giant was backing away, blowing on his huge right fist. The fellow stooped, got his .45.

"You crawl me again an' I'll do worse'n bump your jaw!" he promised. "Boxed-Y hand or not, you're gonna ride behind me to the sheriff—tied hand an' foot!"

Ruff glowered. "That buckskin won't carry double."

"We'll break 'im to carry double, or my name ain't Titanic Harrison!" rumbled the huge man.

He sidled toward the buckskin. The bronco spooked and retreated, swinging front hoofs high to clear dragging reins.

"Whoa, you yallerhammer!" soothed the big man, and tried again. Once more the buckskin leaped away.

Titanic Harrison pointed his six-gun at Ruff. "You catch the crockhead! He's scairt of me."

Ruff got to his feet with alacrity.

"Don't try to ride 'im off!" warned the giant. "You'll sure be pickin' lead outa yourself if you do!"

Advancing on the buckskin, Ruff came within reach of the reins without much trouble. He lunged, got them, gave them a yank. The bronc reared—and for a moment Ruff had the saddled barrel of the animal between himself and the man with the gun.

"Keep away from the Winchester!" barked the giant.

The man could see the Winchester under the other stirrup, so Ruff had no fear of his shooting. Some seconds longer he roughoused the buckskin. Then he led the snorting, blowing horse back to the big man.

"This bronc is mean," he puffed. "He's gonna pitch when you fork 'im."

Titanic Harrison took the reins. "I'll fog that outa 'im! You keep back. There ain't no bronc I can't ride, even if you did spook this'n up on purpose."

Ruff retreated meekly.

The giant swung lightly onto the buckskin, settled in the rig. He rammed his gun into the holster, swept off his battered gray John B. and smacked the bronc's ears smartly.

Down went the buckskin's head. Skyward sailed the animal for more than half his own height. He hit the ground with a stiff-legged, shocking crash. Titanic Harrison lost his hat.

The buckskin took off again. Twice he sunned his sides. On the next buck both saddle and rider left the animal and piled in a tangle a dozen feet away.

Running to the stunned giant, Ruff drew back his fist and punched the fellow in the jaw. He seized the man's gun and his own Frontier .45.

Hunkering down, he slapped the giant's face, first with his left hand, then with the right. He slid fingers inside his shirt and brought out a heavy-bladed knife.

Seizing the end of the latigo strap still attached to the cinch, he shoved it under the giant's nose. The latigo had been practically severed by a knife slash at the spot where it had broken.

"Cut it while I was roughhousin' the bronc!" he said.

"You—you tricked me!" gulped the giant. "Fixed it so the saddle come off!"

RUFF threw both guns and the knife several yards away. He hitched up his pants, tightened his belt. He made knotty fists of his hands and spat on each in turn.

"My Christian friend, I'm gonna do worse than trick you!" he growled. "I'm gonna teach you the error of grabbin' brones off pilgrims you don't know. Then I'm gonna get to the bottom of this mysterious Devil's Ear business. I've always wanted to whip a gent your size. And now—"

"And now—" crackled a new voice. "And now—you'll put your hands up and stand still!"

Ruff spun. His eyes popped. Sagging jaw pulled his big mouth to a gaping circle.

The giant got up, swung a fist. Ruff made a belated effort to duck, failed. The blow flattened him.

The giant straddled him, lifting a monster fist for another swing.

"No need of that, Titanic," said the girl.

She advanced from beside the sage clump which had sheltered her furtive approach. She carried a cocked Winchester.

Her sunburned brown hair would come about to his shoulder, Ruff decided. That made her a rather small girl. She was twenty or so. Her mouth was full and glowing, her eyes large and brown. She was a beauty; and she was both uneasy and angry.

"What're you doin' here, Miss Dawn?" muttered the big man. "You're takin' an awful chance."

"I wanted to make sure you got away safely." She eyed Ruff frostily. "Is this runt one of the Boxed-Y outfit?"

The giant stroked his jaw gingerly. "He may be pint size, but he's all man when you get hold of him. Sure, he's one of 'em!"

Ruff began, "I ain't—"

"Shut up!" snapped the girl. "You're going to catch that buckskin and not argue about it!"

Ruff eyed the Winchester barrel. He wet his lips.

"All right," he grumbled.

"Get going!" ordered the girl. "We'll follow you. We've got to stay under cover, but we'll keep you in sight. Try to pull one of your tricks, and you'll find that out!"

Ruff hesitated briefly, then strode after the buckskin. Dragging reins had stopped the horse a hundred yards distant. The animal saw him coming, began to sidle away.

Homely face disgusted, Ruff quickened his pace. The horse backed through a cluster of scrawny piñons, negotiated a gully. Ruff looked back, saw no sign of the girl and the giant, and fronted his eyes. He was barely holding his own with the fleeing buckskin. The bronc was wily at handling the dragging reins.

"Dang that educated critter!" Ruff growled.

The buckskin stepped on the reins, nearly somersaulted. Ruff sprinted, seeing his chance to catch the horse. The chase had covered fully half a mile.

Lunging, he captured the reins. A glance back disclosed no trace of his two captors. He debated forking the buckskin bareback and trying to make a getaway, wrinkling his forehead as he considered various angles of the thing.

"Guess I'll string along with 'em an' see what happens," he decided. "Dang me! It'll be worth it to get another look at that gal!"

He started back, leading the bronc. The girl and the giant still had not appeared.

Suddenly four men swelled up out of the sage around him. They pointed guns at him.

CHAPTER II

NECKTIE PARTY

RUFF put up his hands without being told.

Saying nothing, the four stalked grimly forward. Three were bandy-legged cowhands with nothing unusual about their appearance.

The fourth, their leader, came to a stiff-legged plant before Ruff. The fellow was tall, a bit dog-faced. He wore a green silk shirt and a lemon-hued silk neckerchief. The band on his black hat was lemon silk.

The man rifled Ruff's clothes in search of weapons, eyed Ruff's empty holster, then looked at the buckskin.

"Musta lost his gun when the bronc throwed him," he growled. "Sure, that's what happened. He sneaked away from the dang girl's ranch carryin' a bridle an' caught this stray bronc. He couldn't ride the cayuse bareback."

"Couldn't ride—" Ruff choked off his snort. He had discovered the Boxed-Y brand worked with silver rivets into the dog-faced man's leather chaps.

He began to understand. These were Boxed-Y riders. The dog-faced man must be Silky Ed Crowder, the outfit foreman.

Ruff flicked a glance across the sage and piñon-carpeted brakes, saw no trace of the girl and the giant. They must have seen these men.

"What kind of a hoorah is this?" he demanded.

Silky Ed Crowder ignored the question, jerked an order at his three men. "Tie the little squirt up!"

Ruff swore explosively, backed away. A lasso rope looped toward him. He failed to duck the noose and was yanked off his feet. The three punchers swarmed atop him, tossed half-hitches over his ankles and wrists and yanked them tight.

Silky Ed Crowder came over to glower down at him.

"Figure you're one of Miss Dawn Lorde's Broken-Stirrup hands," he grunted. "We're gonna find where you're holdin' old Zeke McCann. And if you've learned where the Devil's Ear is, we're gonna make you tell us that, too. First—how'd you get away from the Broken-Stirrup?"

"I'll be damned!" Ruff gulped. "This business is gettin' crazier every minute. An' you sure got me wrong. I don't—"

Silky Ed Crowder tossed his head at the buckskin. "Make a surcingle around that bronc with a rope. Tie the other end of the rope to this runt's feet. We'll make him think crazy business when he's dragged through a few cactus beds."

Ruff reared to a sitting position, his homely face shocked. "Hey—you ain't gonna do that to me? I'm just a ranny sifftin' through on the scout for a job. I don't know nothin' about no Zeke McCann or Devil's Ear or anythin' else!"

"You don't, eh?" Silky Ed Crowder showed coffee-colored teeth in an ugly leer. "In that case, you're just outa luck, because we think you do. You'll be ready to beller the truth when you're full of cactus stickers. Did you leave the Broken-Stirrup alone?"

Ruff lunged against the ropes. "What you're gonna do to me ain't human. I tell you, I don't work for no Broken-Stirrup outfit."

"Our milk of human kindness has plumb curdled," said Silky Ed Crowder. "Havin' the Broken-Stirrup salivate two of our rannies soured it a-plenty. That, an' grabbin' old Zeke McCann to find out where the Devil's Ear is. We've had the Broken-Stirrup watched close for a week hopin' to get our hands on one of their waddies."

"I tell you—"

"Throw a surcingle around that buckskin's barrel!" ordered Crowder.

Ruff rolled his eyes in the direction of the waterhole, where he had left Dawn Lorde and the giant Titanic Harrison. If they were looking on, there was no sign of it.

Doubling backward like a contortionist, Ruff found his spurred boot heels with numbing fingers.

"Hey—lemme show you something!" He made his voice terrified.

Silky Ed Crowder came over, bent down, said, "Well, what—"

Ruff reached up both hands—magically freed of ropes—and gripped Silky Ed Crowder's throat. He jerked the man sprawling atop him, seized the fellow's guns, pointed them at the others.

"High like a house!" he snarled.

Up went their hands. Ruff knocked Silky Ed Crowder away, then twisted his spurs so the man could see them. The lower edge of each spur tine, between rowel and heel-band, was ground to a razor edge.

"Got dragged with a foot hung in a stirrup one time," he said harshly. "Since, I've kept my spurs sharpened like that so I could cut myself loose if it ever happened again. Now—"

He let it trail off. Hoof-hammering sound was reaching his ears.

RUFF fanned his captured sixes at the four.

"Unbuckle your belts!" he rapped.

They obeyed, snarling, reluctant. And hardly was the last belt and holster on

the hardpan when a sorrel bronc and rider popped around a hill perhaps two hundred yards away.

"Who's that?" Ruff demanded, and held his guns so the horseman could not see them.

"The boss—Stan Yonkel," Silky Ed Crowder admitted.

"Call 'im!"

The foreman called. Stan Yonkel started, neck-reined toward them. He pulled up a few yards distant, a withered monkey of a man near sixty years of age. A moustache of hairs which stuck out stiffly gave his face the look of an inquisitive mouse. He saw something was wrong. "What's goin' on?"

Ruff produced his sixes. "Plenty. Skin off your hardware an' climb down."

Stan Yonkel blew explosive profanity from under his bristling moustache. But he complied.

Ruff shifted his bound ankles until he sat so he could watch all of them.

"This dog-faced foreman of your'n got off on the wrong foot," he told the rancher. "He was actin' nasty because he figures I'm a Broken-Stirrup rider. I ain't. Now I wanta know what this is all about."

Stan Yonkel scowled at the gun muzzles. "We're tryin' to find old Zeke McCann."

"Who's he?"

"The best dang friend I got," Stan Yonkel said earnestly. "He's a great old jasper. And it's gonna go plenty hard with them Broken-Stirrup skunks who kidnapped 'im!"

Ruff squinted at the old rancher. "What's this mysterious Devil's Ear business?"

Silky Ed Crowder growled profanely. "Better not tell 'im that, Stan!"

Stan Yonkel frowned at his foreman. "Won't hurt nothin'. If he's a Broken-Stirrup rider, he already knows. If he ain't we gotta explain things so he'll turn us loose."

He eyed Ruff steadily. "Like I say, old Zeke McCann is maybe the best friend I got. He's a prospector. Me an' that dang Dawn Lorde gal who owns the Broken-Stirrup has been grub-stakin' him for years. That makes us partners of his'n."

He paused to glower wrathfully. "Well, a week ago old Zeke McCann showed up at my Boxed-Y. He was plenty excited. Said he'd made his find, but it wasn't no gold mine. He called it the Devil's Ear. Swore it wasn't gold, but wouldn't tell us what it was. Said there would be four partners, this Dawn Lorde, a grandson of old Zeke's from over in Arizona, old Zeke

and myself. He had been to the Broken-Stirrup to tell Dawn Lorde and was comin' by to tell me on his way to file—"

"You sure he didn't tell you what he'd found?" Ruff interrupted.

Stan Yonkel glared at him, said nothing.

"I got reasons for bein' interested," Ruff said tightly. "You see, I'm that grandson of old Zeke's from over in Arizona."

STAN YONKEL wheezed a long, surprised breath through his moustache. "The hell you say! You gotta have more proof than your word."

Ruff fished a letter out of his vest pocket, tossed it over. "There's what he wrote me. Just says come over—that he's got somethin' for me."

Old Stan Yonkel read the letter. "That's Zeke's writin' all right. He don't tell you anythin' more about this Devil's Ear than he told us, except that it ain't silver or copper or other metal ore he's found."

"He was plumb cautious," Ruff admitted. "But go ahead with your story. What happened to Zeke?"

"He started off to town with two of my riders. Out here in the brakes they was drygulched. One of my men was killed. The other got away. Old Zeke was kidnapped. My man who got away winged one of the gang and saw the drygulchers were from the Broken-Stirrup. Well, we rode over there. One of their hands was sportin' a new bullet hole in the shoulder. We accused 'em of grabbin' old Zeke to make 'im tell where the Devil's Ear was."

Stan Yonkel growled angrily. "We had a shootin' scrape. Silky Ed salivated one of their rannies, but they run us off. Since then we been kinda holdin' the Broken-Stirrup in a state of siege. By Harry, they may have old Zeke, but it ain't gonna do 'em no good!"

"She's all clear now," Ruff nodded soberly. "That big Titanic Harrison was makin' a break when he grabbed me a few minutes ago."

"Huh?" exploded Stan Yonkel. "What's this?"

"Talk low. The big jasper an' the gal are watchin' us now, afraid to show themselves because I got a gun. Don't let 'em hear us."

Then, rapidly, Ruff explained the happenings at the waterhole, up until his capture while pursuing the buckskin.

"Goin' for the sheriff, huh!" snarled old Stan Yonkel. "They're figurin' on tying us up with the law so they'll have a chance to make Zeke take 'em to that Devil's Ear."

"What they told you about tryin' to find Zeke themselves was a pack of damn lies!" Silky Ed Crowder grated. "We figured they'd try that stunt. That's why we was gonna drag you—to make you confess."

Ruff fiddled absently with the guns he had taken from the foreman. His gaze found a huge piñon tree a hundred yards distant, rested there. "We gotta use skullduggery in this. I got an idea."

"What?" asked Stan Yonkel.

"That tree over yonder—it's got a limb stickin' out just right to hang a man on. You fellers put me on my bronc, put the bronc under that limb an' run a rope from my neck over it to the tree trunk. Tie it to the tree with a knot that'll slip if any weight is put on it, so there won't be no danger of me stranglin' if the bronc jumps."

"You mean us ride off like we'd left you to hang?"

"Yeah. The big gent an' the girl will cut me down. They'll be sure I'm an enemy of your'n. I'll roar like I want your blood, an' they'll maybe give me a job. If they do, I'll learn if they've got old Zeke."

SILKY ED CROWDER rubbed his hands. "That's a good idea. Gimme back my guns an' we'll do it."

Ruff shook his head. "What d'you take me for? Might as well tell you now I ain't trustin' nobody too much until I find out what's what. I'll keep your hardware in my shirt. If one of you jaspers tries to pick up his gun, it's gonna be too bad. I ain't forgot you was gonna drag me through cactus beds."

The foreman scowled uneasily.

"One of you grab this rope on my ankles," Ruff directed. "Pretend to capture me. But be dang sure it don't go no further'n pretendin'!"

Instantly a Boxed-Y ranny seized the rope which they had intended to sur-circle around the buckskin's barrel. He yanked. Ruff waved his arms, fell backward. Old Stan Yonkel leaped upon him.

"Careful!" Ruff grunted. "Tie my hands in front where I can reach the gun in my shirt!"

His wrists were tied. They boosted him on the buckskin, led the animal to the great piñon tree. A lasso rope dropped about his neck.

Casting alert glances about, Ruff was unable to discern a sign of the girl or big Titanic Harrison. He dampened his lips. Had they taken fright and fled? If so, this elaborate trick was wasted effort.

The rope snaked across the limb. Stan Yonkel himself waded into the dense

brush around the piñon bole to make the end fast.

"Be dang sure that knot'll slip!" Ruff breathed.

Old Stan Yonkel let him see the knot as it was tied. "That all right? It'll come loose if your bronc jumps."

"Sure. I'll have the big gent and the girl cut the rope so they won't see it's a fake knot." Ruff twisted his head to ease the noose about his neck. "Drag it, you jaspers!"

They strode off, Stan Yonkel to his sorrel bronc, the others toward the spot where they had left their horses. They all disappeared in the jumbled brakes.

Minutes dragged. Ruff heard hoof sound of horses being ridden away, although no one appeared. The buckskin under him began to kick at biting flies, making him unpleasantly conscious of the noose about his neck.

"Whoa, boy!" he grunted. He looked closely at the rope knotted about the piñon trunk to make sure it would slip in case of an accident.

After that he felt better. The knot would certainly slip. There was no danger of his hanging. Five minutes later, possibly more, he heard a rustle off to the right. It was repeated, as though someone were creeping through the sage.

"Help!" Ruff howled, and made his homely face register as much agony as possible.

He looked toward the sound, expecting the girl or huge Titanic Harrison to appear. But they did not. Nothing stirred.

The buckskin snorted, kicked violently at a greenhead. The tug of the rope at his neck moved him to glance at the knot again.

Horror flooded his face. It was no longer a slipknot! Someone had crept, unheard, through the brush to the tree trunk and shoved a small stick through the loop portion of the knot.

His convulsive start as he made the discovery excited the buckskin. The horse walked off.

Leaning over, Ruff took up the slack in the rope as gently as he could. But the shock was still ghastly. His windpipe closed as though poured full of molten lead.

Wildly he clawed for the gun he had thrust inside his shirt. But the stretching of his body as it swung by the neck pulled his shirt tail out of his pants. The gun eluded his fingers, slipped to the hardpan.

He swung like a rock on a string, began to strangle.

CHAPTER III

DEAD MAN

BRINGING his hands up, Ruff sought to grip the rope and ease the throttling pressure. He succeeded only partially. There was absolutely no possibility of his climbing to the limb, or even high enough to free the throttling noose.

His ears began to roar. His eyes protruded.

Suddenly there was a crashing in the sagebrush near-by. Diminutive Dawn Lorde appeared. She ran to the pignon, tore at the knotted rope.

The hemp slackened abruptly, letting Ruff down in a pile in the sage. He felt the six-gun gouge into his hip, and had presence of mind to jam it into his shirt before the girl reached his side.

"We thought it was a trick!" she gasped. "It looked like a fake hanging—so we could rescue you."

Ruff kneaded his throat, groaned loudly to cover his surprise. So they had seen through the ruse! "Where's the big gent?" he croaked.

She pointed. "Over there. Watching."

Titanic Harrison had appeared atop a boulder some three score yards distant, gripping a Winchester, staring about alertly.

Ruff scowled—not entirely because of the agony in his throat. The giant's position was such that he could have crept up, unobserved by the girl, and thrust the stick in the rope knot. It had been Dawn Lorde moving which had attracted his attention, Ruff decided. She had come from a spot near where he had heard the sound.

He squinted at her, wondering if she had pulled some sort of a grotesque practical joke on him. No. Her face was strained, serious.

"Let's hike outa here!" he grunted.

Huge Titanic Harrison got off his rock and came over. Together the three of them sought shelter in a near-by gully.

"Why did they do such a thing to you?" the girl demanded.

Ruff stroked his neck, worked his jaw gingerly. "You still figure me as a Boxed-Y hand?"

"No—not now."

"Well, I ain't. But what I told you about bein' a ranny siftin' through on the scout for a job wasn't exactly the truth. Old Zeke McCann is my granddaddy."

"Oh! You told Stan Yonkel that?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then that's why they tried to hang you!"

Ruff's homely face registered stark

puzzlement. "Stan Yonkel claimed old Zeke McCann was about his best friend. Somehow, I believed 'im. Yonkel didn't seem such a cultus hombre."

The girl stared at him curiously. "You say that—after what they did to you!"

Ruff blinked. He had almost betrayed the fact that the hanging was his own idea. He got a grip on himself.

"I wish you'd tell me what's behind this!" he said hastily.

"Zeke McCann is a splendid old man," the girl declared. "I have been grubstaking him for years. A week ago he came to me and said he had made his strike. He said it wasn't gold or silver or the usual metals, but wouldn't reveal more than that. He rode off, saying he was going to tell Stan Yonkel, who had also grubstaked him, then ride to town and file his claim."

She grimaced angrily. "Late that night one of my punchers went to the bunkhouse door and somebody shot him in the shoulder. A little later Stan Yonkel and his outfit rode up. They accused us of kidnapping Zeke. There was a fight. Silky Ed Crowder shot one of my men. Since then they've had my Broken-Stirrup ranch surrounded."

Ruff nodded slowly. This story dovetailed with the one Stan Yonkel had told him.

FOR the space of two minutes Ruff thought deeply. He made a decision.

"Listen!" He pointed off to the right. "Don't you hear somethin'?"

The girl and Titanic Harrison looked where he pointed.

Leaning over, Ruff wrenched the girl's Winchester out of her hands. Pivoting, he jammed the octagon barrel against Titanic Harrison's expansive chest.

Titanic choked, fluttered his hands at his six-guns, then thought better of it. "What're you doin'?"

Ruff scowled warningly at the girl. Rage was in her eyes. She seemed about to spring upon him.

"Behave an' you won't get hurt!" he told her. "I'm gonna start bangin' this thing around. That hangin' was supposed to be a fake, like you thought. But somebody sneaked up an' tied the knot hard in the rope. It could've been one of you, but danged if I see why you'd do it. It could've been one of old Stan Yonkel's outfit. But that ain't reasonable because I'm bettin' Yonkel ain't the kind of a gent to do a trick like that. Anyhow, I don't see why they'd want to scrag me."

"You—you—" The girl was almost incoherent with anger. "You're one of Yonkel's gang!"

"Nope. I'm lookin' out for number one—Oscar Ruff." He eyed her steadily. "I wish you'd believe that."

"I don't!"

He shrugged. "Well, that's too bad. But it sure don't alter my intentions none. I'm gonna hold you two prisoners. Then I'm gonna grab old Stan Yonkel an' his foreman an' put you all together. Then I'm gonna work on you all until somebody busts loose with the truth about this. There's an African in the kindlin', what I mean!"

Huge Titanic Harrison sneered viciously. His big fingers curled and uncurled.

He cursed twice, violent oaths that made the girl go scarlet, then began: "You little—"

Wham! Gunshot sound clattered across the brakes.

Titanic Harrison clipped his mouth shut tightly. He put fumbling hands to his chest, took an aimless sidewise step. Then he doubled suddenly down on his face.

At the report Ruff leaped backward, slanted his Winchester at the spot from which the bushwhacker had fired and stroked the trigger. He saw nothing to shoot at—just fired blindly in hope of preventing a second shot.

"Duck!" he ripped at the girl. "That's the buzzard who monkeyed with the rope."

The girl dropped to all fours, scuttled down the gully. Flattened, Ruff waited for another shot. None came. When he thought it safe he looked at Titanic Harrison.

The puncture in the giant's shirt front told him the man had been shot through the heart.

Furtively, Ruff wiggled up out of the gully. He speared his hat on the tip of a sage brush. No bullets were drawn. He left the hat there, moved a dozen yards away and tossed a rock to make noise near the heat. That did not draw fire, either.

From down the gully where the girl had gone came a faint screech and struggle sounds.

Ruff leaped recklessly erect, flung for the spot.

Wham! Wham! The bushwhacker had not moved. His bullets made hot squawking bare inches in front of Ruff's face.

The undersized ranny pitched down.

TWISTING as he landed, Ruff exploded the Winchester in the general direction of the unseen marksman. There was no sign he had hit anybody.

An open patch of alkali lay between him and where the girl had screeched. He

circled it, scuttling on all fours, making slow progress, but not daring to straighten and run.

Into the gully he tumbled. A moment later he found jumbled bootprints, large ones and small ones. The girl had been seized there. Down the gully he sprinted, trailing.

The gash widened, deepened. From sand the bottom changed to bedrock. Smaller gullies opened into it.

Ruff stopped, knowing he had lost the trail. He strained his ears. He began to perspire.

"Two of 'em!" he breathed. "Maybe more." He mopped his forehead with a sleeve.

All about him was heat and silence.

Back toward the body of Titanic Harrison he crept. He made sure the giant was dead. A bit later he found where the bushwhacker had stood, but he found no empty cartridges.

"Caught 'em in his hand," he decided.

He circled, cautiously at first, then more carelessly. Time after time he showed himself without drawing fire. The brakes were so rough as to be almost impossible for one man to search. To the southward they became the Badlands and the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, probably the most torn-up stretch of country in the world.

A quarter of an hour of that and he heard horses galloping. He sought a small pinnacle quickly.

Old Stan Yonkel, Silky Ed Crowder and the three Boxed-Y riders came into view. They thundered toward him as swiftly as the nature of the brakes would permit.

Ruff swore softly. "That about lets them out! They couldn't have done it—they was too far away when I first heard their bronzes."

"We heard shootin'!" yelled Stan Yonkel. "What happened?"

Ruff let them come up. "Somebody bushwhacked Titanic Harrison an' grabbed the girl!"

He took them to where Titanic Harrison lay, told them what had occurred. He showed them where the ambusher had stood, where the girl had been seized. He told how nearly fatal the hanging trick had been.

Gathered around the body once more, Silky Ed Crowder whispered something in an aside to Stan Yonkel. The rancher whispered back to the foreman.

Ruff scowled at the byplay, started over.

Instantly they both drew guns and covered him.

"Get the six in his shirt!" grated Stan Yonkel.

Ruff gave the man who approached him a glare that stopped the fellow in his tracks. "What kinda horseplay is this?"

Stan Yonkel looked him up and down wrathfully. "I guess we savvy this whole thing, now!"

"Yeah," leered Silky Ed Crowder. "It musta been you who grabbed old Zeke McCann to learn where the Devil's Ear is, and laid the blame onto the Broken-Stirrup outfit. Dunno how you learned about the Devil's Ear. We'll find that out later. If you're Zeke's grandson that'll explain it. Anyhow, you killed Harrison before we ever found you!"

"We're takin' you to the sheriff for killin' Titanic Harrison," growled Stan Yonkel. "Titanic must've learned your game."

"You're locoed!" Ruff protested angrily. "I tell you somebody salivated Titanic Harrison an' grabbed the girl!"

"Girl probably wasn't around at all," sneered Silky Ed Crowder. "You heist your dewclaws!"

CHAPTER IV

BLASTING DEATH

WHEN they had him disarmed Ruff tried again. "You jugheads! That girl is in trouble! She was here. I'll show you her bootprints!"

"I saw them bootprints!" Silky Ed Crowder growled. "They looked to me like your own!"

"Let's measure 'em," suggested Stan Yonkel.

They went down the gully. Coming in view of the spot where Dawn Lorde had been captured, Ruff stopped. His face purpled. He cursed his captors loudly, bitterly.

"I'm seein' some things now!" he snarled. "Some of you walked on them prints, blotted 'em out! You're trying to frame this whole mess onto me. You've got some men in your outfit I ain't seen. You had 'em plug Titanic Harrison an' grab the girl."

"That's a lie!" roared Stan Yonkel.

Ruff glared at him. "You got more men in your outfit, ain't you?"

"Two," the old rancher snapped. "But they're at home."

Ruff gave a shrug that shook his entire head and shoulders. "All right! All right! You've got this mess hogtied onto me."

"C'mon," Stan Yonkel ordered. "We'll take 'im to the sheriff."

Ruff began, "That girl—"

"Shut up about that girl!" yelled Silky Ed Crowder. "She wasn't here."

"Wait a minute," interposed Yonkel.

"We'll make sure the girl is safe before we take this feller to the law."

Silky Ed Crowder scowled, then brightened. "Sure. We'll hold this jasper at the Boxed-Y while some of us rides over to the Broken-Stirrup to see if she's there."

Ruff ran a rowdy gaze over the group. He wasn't so sure now this gang was framing him. If they were going to make sure pretty Dawn Lorde was safe before they took him to the sheriff . . .

"In case the girl is missin', this gink probably put her outa the way," said Silky Ed Crowder.

So that was it! Ruff crushed his teeth together so hard the enamel squeaked. He let them push him through the sage with Winchester barrels to his buckskin bronc. "How about my saddle?" he protested.

They escorted him to the waterhole for his saddle. Not certain it would do much good, he displayed the slashed cinch.

"Hm-m-m!" said old Stan Yonkel. He looked at unmistakable evidences of a fight in the waterhole. "Looks like you maybe did tell part of the truth."

Silky Ed Crowder finished repairing the slashed latigo strap, swung the rig on the buckskin. "We'll leave him at the Boxed-Y an' some of us'll go see about the girl!"

Ruff scowled as he settled into the kak. This talk about going to see if the girl was safe had him puzzled. There was something back of it. Or maybe these Boxed-Y hombres were not framing him. It was baffling.

He mulled over the thing as they rode southwest.

The Boxed-Y was a horse outfit. Ruff learned that when he came in sight of the corrals and saw the chutes fitted with squeezers. The buildings squatted on the south side of a butte, baking in the afternoon sun, basted with the gray dust of the brakes.

Two punchers came out of the low bunkhouse door as the group rode up.

Stan Yonkel squinted at Ruff, spat.

"These are my other two hands. If that girl was kidnapped as you claim, they couldn't have had a hand in it."

Ruff surveyed the pair. One had his shirt off. The other was carrying a half-finished horsehair hatband he had been braiding.

"Listen, old-timer!" Ruff eyed old Stan Yonkel steadily. "You're either tryin' to kid me, or you're kiddin' yourself. If you're on the up and up, you sure better fog over to the Broken-Stirrup an' see about that girl. Somebody grabbed her, I tell you."

Silky Ed Crowder shot a pointing arm at the sod-roofed log ranchhouse. "You hold 'im in there, Stan. Me an' the boys'll

catch up fresh hosses for the ride to the Broken-Stirrurp."

Stan Yonkel nodded, shucked out his six-gun. "Make it snappy. You—runt—into the house you go!"

Ruff stamped into the ranchhouse, went to a rocking-chair with sheep-skin tacked on the seat, planted himself in it.

He glared at Stan Yonkel. "I'm tellin' you—"

"You ain't tellin' me nothin'!" grunted the old rancher. "I'm tired of listenin' to you. An' I'm holdin' you here while Silky Ed an' some of the boys ride to the Broken-Stirrurp. Maybe we'll know then what's what."

Ruff tilted back in the rocker, locked his fingers together and said no more. Silky Ed Crowder rode up to the door on a fresh horse.

"We'll be back in 'bout three hours," he called.

Wheeling his horse, he galloped back to the bunkhouse. A moment later came a roll of hoofbeats. The noise receded.

Ruff got up, failed to heed Stan Yonkel's growled warning, and strode to the window. He looked out in time to see Silky Ed Crowder and his companions top a knoll and disappear. He counted the riders.

"Say—" He didn't finish it—became silent and tense, ears strained. *All the Boxed-Y hands had ridden with Silky Ed Crowder.*

Stan Yonkel fingered his six-gun. "What's eatin' you?"

Ruff lifted a fist, smashed the glass out of the window.

"Hey!" roared Yonkel. "Them winders cost money!"

Ruff put his head out. He turned it from side to side. He sniffed. Then he jerked back into the room as though he had been struck at. He backed for the door.

"Quick!" he barked. "C'mon outside!" "Stand still!" yelled Yonkel. "You ain't trickin' me!"

Ruff kept moving for the door. He put his hands up. "Quick! Outside!"

He passed through the door into the sunlight, made no effort to dodge away, and literally ran backward.

Old Stan Yonkel followed him, bellowing, "Stand still or I'll salivate you! Stand still or—"

In the door the old rancher halted. He brought the hammer of his gun back, steadied the weapon. Deadly purpose was in his faded old eyes. He suspected somebody might be hiding behind the house, ready to cut down on him when he came out.

"I'm not trickin' you!" Ruff rapped at him. "Under the house! There's—"

Who-o-m! Flame and flying timbers suddenly filled the interior of the ranchhouse. Old Stan Yonkel was blown out of the door like a paper wad from a school kid's bean-shooter.

The sod-covered roof sprouted upward, bloomed a great cloud of smoke. Dust and torn logs boiled, fell back.

RUFF, tumbled end over end by the blast got to his feet as soon as he could. He leaped to old Stan Yonkel.

The withered frame was limp, pinned down by logs. Ruff boosted the logs aside, took the old man's wrist. There was pulse. He flexed Yonkel's bony arms and legs, lifted his head cautiously, pressed fingers to his ribs. No bones seemed to be broken. He was merely knocked out.

Ruff scooped up Yonkel's six-gun, sprinted to the bunkhouse, came back carrying the water bucket. He doused the rancher. The elderly man showed no signs of reviving.

Ruff stared in the direction taken by Silky Ed Crowder. He swore softly. Exploring, he found a sizeable knob in old Stan Yonkel's thatch of white hair. The skull did not seem to be fractured.

Flame was rapidly enwrapping the ruins of the ranchhouse. Somewhere in the burning tangle a box of cartridges started exploding. The slugs squealed about, knocking sparks, digging up dust.

Picking up old Stan Yonkel, Ruff ran to the bunkhouse. He had seen a writing tablet and pencil there. Seizing them, he wrote:

STAN YONKEL:

Your foreman, Silky Ed Crowder, and your spread of punchers are behind this, I think. They must have put a keg of black powder under the house with a long fuse. I'm trailing them.

OSCAR RUFF.

Shouldering the old rancher once more, Ruff carried him to a freight wagon which stood near a corral, put him in the wagon bed, tucked the note in his pocket, covered him with a tarp.

"He'll wake up in time," he grunted.

Silky Ed Crowder had turned the buckskin into a corral with the other horses. Ruff ran to the enclosure, got a lass, spooked the buckskin into a corner and settled the noose on the animal. He saddled, mounted, spurred the trail Silky Ed had taken. Ruff was certain now that Crowder had the girl held prisoner.

Ruff flung along at a mad pace. Miles on, he slowed down and anxiously studied the gait of his horse. The animal's hide was a paste of lather and dust. It was blowing steadily, but not with the spasmodic force that meant exhaustion.

"Got a lot of miles in 'im yet," he concluded.

He pulled up, listened, far ahead he heard the distant rumble of hooves. Carefully he rode on. Rougher and rougher became the terrain. Sagebrush thinned. The knotted little piñons grew scattering and even more scrawny.

Conical buttes of grayish clay grew fewer, giving way almost entirely to stone. The sun, sinking nearer the horizon, sprayed colors in the rock formation with softened glare. It was an awesome waste into which he was riding, a region of scenic grandeur. But Ruff was blind and dead to everything but the clamor of hoofbeats he kept always before him.

"How much further can they be goin'?" he muttered uneasily.

Half an hour later he got the answer. They entered a canyon and the noise ahead died suddenly.

Dismounting, Ruff led the weary buckskin into a side gulch, left the horse there. Afoot, he went ahead.

He inspected old Stan Yonkel's six-gun. Yonkel had carried the hammer on an empty chamber, a common precaution with these single-action guns. It held five cartridges. And Ruff had no more ammunition.

He scowled. His quarry numbered six!

Abruptly he veered left, crept up toward the canyon rimrock. He had heard voices ahead.

SOON after, Ruff sighted the gang. Leading the girl, they wheeled into a sheer-walled, narrower cut. Two men remained on guard there.

Ruff scouted, discovered two more men on watch with the horses. He eyed the rimrock above his head, saw he was going to have trouble climbing it, and looked once more at the canyon into which the girl had been taken. No chance of passing the guards.

He went back to his buckskin and got the lass rope. With that he managed to surmount the wall-like rimrock. Creeping forward, he peered into the side canyon.

There was a shack below him, evidently erected by some prospector in the past. The structure stood on a shelf erosion had left above the canyon bed. Fantastic stone formation like huge spikes studded the slope from the shack to the canyon rimrock. And the rimrock itself was rent by a wash like a knife slash.

"Perfect!" Ruff breathed. He could creep, unobserved, to the very door of the shack!

He listened until he heard voices in the ramshackle structure. The words were

unintelligible from that distance. He descended as silently as possible.

When he was fifty feet from the shack he could understand what was being said.

"I'm tellin' you!" Silky Ed Crowder's voice rasped out. "We're gonna scrag the girl if you don't tell us where this Devil's Ear is!"

"You coyote!" The reply was high, squeaky, wrathful. "You'll sure decorate a rope for what you're doin'!"

Ruff advanced a couple of yards. He recognized that voice—his grandfather, old Zeke McCann. It had been ten years since he had seen the fire-eating old gentleman, but that high-pitched tone was unmistakable.

"So that's why they grabbed the girl!" he told himself. "They couldn't torture old Zeke into talkin', so they're usin' the girl to make 'im tell 'em what they want!"

Two ugly thudding sounds came from the shack. The girl gave a stifled gasp of pain, evidence she was being beaten.

Ruff gripped his gun, tensed for a reckless charge. Then he crouched back.

A man had appeared down the canyon, running toward the shack.

"If this Devil's Ear ain't gold or silver, what is it?" Silky Ed Crowder roared.

Before he got an answer, the running man reached the shack door.

"Hey, Silky!" he barked. "I went down the canyon a piece to keep a lookout like you ordered, an' I heard a bronc blowin'! It's the buckskin that dang runt was ridin'!"

Silky Ed Crowder popped out of the shack door. "Where's the bronc at?"

"I brought 'im up with the other hosses," said the man. "You reckon—"

"I thought the runt got blowed up in the house!" snarled Crowder. "C'mon! Let's look that bronc over!"

They ran down the canyon.

The instant they were out of sight Ruff leaped for the shack door.

CHAPTER V

TRICK KILL

A BOXED-Y rider stepped out of the shack, almost crashing into Ruff. He squawled in fright, pawed for his guns.

Ruff bashed the man in the face with Stan Yonkel's heavy six, knocking the fellow backward into the decrepit structure. The gunslick's spurs hooked the threshold and he crashed down. Sailing into the air, Ruff descended on the man's stomach.

He swooped, got his victim's guns, gave the fellow's head two sleep-inducing blows.

Pretty Dawn Lorde, bound once more, was piled in the center of the shack. She had a livid bruise on one cheek where Silky Ed Crowder had struck her.

"You!" she choked. "They said you were blown up with the Boxed-Y ranch house!"

"Big Plenty!" howled old Zeke McCann. "The runt himself!"

The elderly prospector was spread-eagled on the dirt floor. Ropes stretched taut from his wrists and ankles to four pegs driven into the ground held him. His swollen, enpurpled arms spoke amply of the torture he had undergone. They must have kept him thus for days.

Zeke McCann was even more pee-wee in stature than Ruff. He had the physical build of a gnarled old ape. A wide, delighted grin twisted his homely, wrinkled face.

Ruff rolled the girl out of line with the door.

A bullet came in and clouted slivers off the wall. Ruff sighted Silky Ed Crowder and the man who had found the buckskin. The shout from the overpowered guard had drawn them back. He fired at them, missed, but drove them out of sight.

Rapidly he untied Dawn Lorde, then old Zeke McCann.

"They seized me right after Titanic Harrison was shot," the girl gasped. "It was two of the Boxed-Y hands."

Ruff nodded, told her he had guessed that. He tried showing his hat at the door, but drew no shot. He found a rusty Karo can about the color of his own sun-baked face, put it in the hat and tried again. *Clang!* The can banged across the room.

Instantly, Ruff fanned a shot back. He got a bark of surprise.

"They won't bite on that again," he decided.

He poked the chinking out of the logs in a couple of places to make loopholes. Then he saw old Zeke McCann still lay on the floor, spread-eagled as the ropes had held him.

"I'm sure petrified!" the old prospector groaned. "Kinda give me a start an' maybe I can get movin'."

Ruff pounded the stiffened, paralyzed muscles. Zeke McCann moaned through clenched teeth, became wet with perspiration. Ruff knew he was undergoing terrible agony.

When the elderly man could wave his arms feebly, Ruff left the limbering-up job to the girl and, not without some effort, pried a hole in the rear wall. He hoped they could creep out and escape the same way he had entered the canyon.

But a bullet screamed into the hole he had opened.

"We ain't outa this by a dang sight," McCann groaned. "I can work myself into shape now, Miss."

Dawn Lorde got up. "Give me one of those guns and I'll watch the back."

"You get over against the north wall an' stay there!" he said gruffly. "That'll turn bullets better'n the others."

"But why—"

He tried to scowl, became hot and uncomfortable. He pulled at his shirt collar, although it was open three buttons down.

"Daggonit!" he floundered at last. "Don't argue with a feller!"

FOR forty minutes nothing of importance happened. Then, up on the rim-rock near the gash by which he had descended, Ruff saw a bit of white cloth fluttering.

The cloth appeared and shook again. It looked like somebody's summer underwear.

Ruff hesitated, then waved his hat through the hole he had opened in the rear wall of the shack.

A man appeared cautiously on the rim-rock and crept down through the gash.

"One of Silky Ed's gang," Ruff muttered. "I don't savvy this. But if he wants to palaver we'll take a chance. We ain't got much to lose."

The actions of the descending man were strange. He took great pains to remain concealed from the canyon mouth.

Ruff gave old Zeke McCann a gun. "Watch the front close. They may be pullin' a shenanygin'!"

The Boxed-Y hand came within speaking distance.

"I'm gonna help you," he called in a low voice. "I plumb balk at killin' a woman. I got enough of this mess."

"Yeah?" said Ruff doubtfully.

"Silky Ed brought a keg of that gunpowder from the Boxed-Y," the man whispered. "He got it planted on the rim-rock so it'll blow the whole side of the canyon down on this shack. He left me there to light the fuse. But I ain't gonna do it. You sneak out with me, then we'll blow the canyon wall onto the shack an' he'll think you're all dead."

"Santa Claus!" Ruff gulped. "You mean that?"

"I sure do. Only—you gotta promise to let me hit for Mexico."

"Sure—we'll let you go free as the wind!" Ruff beckoned Dawn Lorde and Zeke McCann, seized the unconscious man.

They crept out, joined the Boxed-Y rider. The man looked nervous, worried. He

passed over his six-guns as Ruff lowered the unconscious man clear of the avalanche the powder would cause.

"So you'll know I ain't trickin' you!" he said.

Carefully remaining hidden from the canyon mouth, they worked up the canyon rim. They reached the narrow, knife-like slash in the rimrock.

"Here's the fuse." The Boxed-Y hand indicated the grayish cord with its filling of black powder. The fuse protruded from under a boulder. Beyond the boulder it stretched several yards to vanish in a crack in the rock.

"I'll crawl up an' see if the coast is clear," started the Boxed-Y hand. "It's a long fuse. You light it an' come up together."

The man crawled upward, reached for the fuse. As a matter of precaution, he glanced upward.

The Boxed-Y rider was scrambling madly to get away from them!

Ruff grunted explosively. He kicked aside the boulder under which the fuse disappeared. A tin canister of black powder was revealed!

"The coyote!" he gritted. "Short fuse! The rest of the fuse was a blind. We'd a-been blowed up!"

He fanned a bullet at the disappearing Boxed-Y man, charged upward after the would-be slayer.

THE fellow had a rifle concealed at the top. But in his wild haste the man had paused only to scoop up the weapon, then dash madly across the tableland.

Ruff shot the man in the left leg. The fellow fell, squirmed around and tried to use his rifle. Ruff's six bellowed again. The man slouched over slackly atop his Winchester.

A hundred feet away Silky Ed Crowder and two other men leaped from behind a boulder. Excitement over the failure of their evil scheme made them reckless.

Ruff dived, rolled. Lead made high barking squeaks around him. He got the Winchester from under the Boxed-Y rider's body, levered the empty cartridge from the ejector gate, and took his time aiming.

The rifle jarred his shoulder—one of the men with Silky Ed Crowder suddenly got down on all fours as though looking for something. The fellow caughed horribly a couple of times, then spread out flat.

Silky Ed Crowder and the other man leaped for cover. Crowder got out of sight, dusted closely by a Winchester slug. Ruff shot again and knocked Crowder's companion against a boulder. His next slug felled the man.

Ruff charged. He could hear Crowder clattering down into the main canyon, trying to reach the horses. Gaining the rimrock, Ruff started down himself.

A gunshot filled the canyon with gutturing thunder. Ruff lurched, nearly fell down the sheer face of the rimrock, managed to stumble back to safety. He sat down, stared vacantly at the hole in his right sleeve which welled crimson.

He tried the arm. No bones were broken. But he could hardly move it.

"Muscles torn!" he groaned.

Peering over the rim, he shot three times at Silky Ed Crowder and the surviving gunslick. They thundered around a bend as though bearing charmed lives, spurring their horses.

Pretty Dawn Lorde came up, assisting old Zeke McCann.

"They got away!" Ruff grinned wryly. "Not that I wasn't kinda tickled to see 'em go."

"Oh!" The girl's cry was anguished as she saw his reddening sleeve. She folded to her knees at his side.

Old Zeke McCann squinted at them owlishly, then with a knowing look on his homely old face hobbled to the rimrock edge. He started to glance back—but suddenly focused his gaze down the canyon.

The sheer-walled defile had abruptly filled with gun sound. Volley after volley of shots clamored. Then there was silence.

"Silky Ed an' his friend musta run into trouble," Old Zeke chuckled.

Stan Yonkel rode into view down the canyon. He sighted them, waved his arms wildly.

"I followed you! An' I salivated both the coyotes!" Old Zeke McCann tugged at his wrinkled jaw. "Well, where they'll be goin' it's too darn bad they can't take along some of that asbestos they was tryin' so hard to get."

"Asbestos!" Ruff ejaculated.

"Huh—sure!" grinned old Zeke. "That's what I found—a whole dang cliff of asbestos rock. Stringy stuff kinda reminded me of what I figured the fuzz on the Devil's Ear would be like, so I called her the Devil's Ear. Boy—howdy! If it ain't worth a million, I'll eat the whole works."

He squinted at approaching Stan Yonkel. "Guess it's lucky I mailed you that letter, Big Plenty, before I let Silky Ed overhear me tellin' old Stan I was gonna cut 'im in on a fortune."

He waited for an answer, got none, and looked around. Ruff and Dawn Lorde had pretty much lost interest in the recital. Old Zeke grinned.

"Aw, heck! Reckon maybe I'd better go down an' kinda keep old Stan from interuptin'."

Black Knight's Bondage

By Eric Lennox



*Out the dim mists of time,
came the Black Knight—
searching for the souls of
Lady Marion and Reinald the
White Knight, in the present-
day Marion Horvendille and
Roger Kennaston.*

THE musty old antique shop was like dozens of others I had visited in that section of town. But this time my attention was caught and held by an object in the window which had not been there the last time I had passed the store.

It was a beautiful example of the work of John Gottschalk—the late, world-famous puppeteer. It was one of his little mediaeval groups. Not marionettes, really, but the sort of thing he made for his own amusement—and of which there

are known to be only about a dozen in existence. I had acquired three of them, already, and it was my ambition to gather together the complete collection—if my luck and funds could prove sufficient.

This one—as did all the others—represented a group of knights in armor. But, instead of being the depiction of a tournament, such as the other Gottschalk groups I had seen, this one seemed to be the illustration of a romantic incident in some forgotten story.

Seven of the nine male figures were mounted, and two were on the ground, engaged in a duel with broadswords. One of these was clad in glistening black armor, the other in white. Leaning against a tree, nearby, a girl in a low-bodiced, velvet gown, watched the scene in an attitude of terror, her hands clasped over her mouth as if to stifle a scream. Not far away, a little brook was represented by a crooked strip of green glass, and by the side of the brook a little tent was pitched.

The figures of the men were about three inches high, and the horses and other objects in the scene were scaled accordingly. The whole was enclosed in a sort of little show-case, about two feet long, and a foot in height and depth.

I cannot express the weird sensation that swept over me as I stood entranced, and took in the details of this little three-dimensional picture. It was a strange mixture of joy and terror. I felt that I knew the story behind the scene; that, somehow, it concerned me intimately. But I could not remember—and the strangest thing about it was the consciousness that I *should* remember.

Whatever its price, I knew that I must possess this particular group. I tore my avaricious gaze from it and entered the shop.

The proprietor was busy with a customer. The two of them were bending over some object in a black velvet case, but from where I stood I could not see what the case contained. I gave more than a passing glance to the customer, for it was a girl with an extraordinarily beautiful form, and as near as I guessed from the three-quarters view I had of it, a face that matched it in perfection.

She was arguing agitatedly with the shopkeeper, but I forebore to eavesdrop. I walked over to the window where the prize I hoped to capture rested, and feasted my eyes on its rich colors and contours until, at last, the girl left and the shopkeeper approached me.

As he did so, he closed the lid of the velvet-lined box, over which he and the girl had been arguing—but not before I had caught a glimpse of its contents.

With a gasp, I reached out and snatched the box from his hand and opened it.

Then I knew my eyes had not betrayed me—and I received the shock of my life. The box contained the missing half of the charm which, that moment, I was wearing on my watch-chain. It was the lost portion of the so-called sigil of Narl

The half I possessed was a family heirloom of great antiquity. How it came to be in the possession of the Kennastons I did not know—nor, I think, had any of my recent forebears known. It had been handed down from one generation to another, but its story had been lost in transit. It had little intrinsic value, being but half a broken disc of solid gold, about one inch in diameter, and inscribed over its entire surface with characters of an unknown language which no philologist, who had seen it, had ever been able to translate.

My original mission in the shop forgotten, I took it from the box and fitted it to my half. The edges matched perfectly!

"Hela!"

I looked up at the shopkeeper's exclamation of surprise. "Where did you get this?" I asked tensely.

He raised his shoulders. "*M'sieu*, I know not. For many years I have had it."

"What do you want for it?"

Again the shrug, followed by a low chuckle of astonishment. "*C'est droll!* For so many years I have had it, without one customer wishing to buy! And now, in two days, I have *three* customers . . ."

"I'll pay you whatever you wish," I said. "As you can see, I am entitled to own it—since already I possess the other half. It is an heirloom in my family. Doubtless the half you own was stolen from my ancestors long ago."

The shopkeeper smiled deprecatingly. "Since it happened so long ago, the law would not recognize your claim, *m'sieu*—and unhappily it is not for sale. But yesterday, a man saw it in the window. He came in and paid part of the price. Tomorrow he will return to claim it. And today the young lady begged of me that I sell it to her, demanded that I tell her the man's name and his address. So anxious was she to see him, *m'sieu*, that even now she has gone to his place of business to bargain with him. Not even until tomorrow could she wait."

"Tell me," I said, "who is this man—and where is his place of business?"

The storekeeper sighed. "Perhaps he will be angry with me," he said regretfully, "but since I have already told the pretty *jeune demoiselle* . . . He is *M'sieu* P. Montors, at the Musée Metropolitan.

He is—what you call?—a guard. But I know not at what hours he works."

I waited to hear no more. Forgetting completely about the Gottschalk group, I darted out of the shop, hailed a cab and sped to the Metropolitan Museum—only to find that my man had gone home, and the museum authorities adamant in their refusal to give the address of any employee to an unidentified stranger.

There seemed to be nothing else to do but wait, until the morrow, and attempt to waylay Montors at the antique shop. But since I was there, I indulged myself in one of my favorite pastimes—I visited the armor room of the museum.

IT is a marvelous, awe-inspiring spectacle, that armor room. It is a strangely moving thing to see those majestic steel figures mounted on their metal-clad steeds, austere haughty in their mediaeval dignity. In hauberk and casque, breast-plate and greaves, they are like somberly gleaming monuments to the memory of a grander age than ours.

But there is something eerie about them, too. Strolling through their rigid ranks I was often assailed by a strange sensation that I could never quite analyze. It was a feeling half vague, formless fear, and half faintly pulsing excitement. It was not altogether an unpleasant feeling but surely not enjoyable enough to account for the fascination of the place that drew me there two or three times every week. I had become an habitu  without knowing exactly why—without even faintly suspecting the real reason.

That day I lingered later than usual. The bell—the signal to clear the building—had already rung. The soft twilight beams of the setting sun seeped through the lofty west windows, making the air faintly luminous; cloaking that silent throng of antique figures with a nimbus of somber mystery. I leaned against one of the great columns, indifferent to the knowledge that I should be going, that soon a guard would be ordering me out of the place. I gazed with a curious fascination at the towering figure in the middle of the mounted cavalcade.

It was, I knew, only a dummy in that handsome suit of gleaming black armor, sitting astride of his heavily sheathed dummy horse; but as I gazed at it I was suddenly conscious of a feeling of expectancy. It was as though I were awaiting some movement, some sign from the figure—some signal that would bridge a gap that existed between us. Somehow I felt that the strange fascination these figures held for me, was about to be explained and justified.

And as this feeling grew stronger, an-

other sensation grew along with it—a sensation of fear that quickly changed to something very like panic. I had no idea what it was I feared; I only knew that something terrible was going to happen very soon. I wanted to take to my heels and leave this place, never to return; but I could not.

My forehead was damp with cold moisture, and every muscle in my body seemed slowly hardening into rigid steel. My breath was coming in shallow, choking gasps; but still I waited—rooted to the spot I stood upon, as immovable and incapable of voluntary action as the figures about me

And then the spell that held me was broken.

As though she had appeared out of the gravely glowing air itself, a slender girl seemed suddenly to materialize before my very eyes. At first her small body was like a mist, floating slowly toward me over the floor. And then I saw that she was solid, material, alive; walking across the floor with a gracefully lithe movement—and that her dove-gray suit, with its collar of squirrel, blended so perfectly with the ghostly light of the place, that it was no wonder I had not seen her until she was practically upon me.

She was breathtakingly beautiful. Her dark hair, under her close-fitting gray hat, curled softly down to frame the ivory-and-rose oval of her face, which seemed to glow in the dusk with a strange, pale light of its own. But it was her eyes, dark, and wide-spread in an expression of joyous wonder, that held me enthralled.

Those eyes were not fixed on my own. As she neared me, I saw that she was gazing steadfastly at the charm—my half of the sigil of Narl—which hung suspended on my watch-chain, midway between my upper vest pockets. She came close to me and stopped. I recognized her now—she was the girl I had seen in the antique shop. The girl who was so anxious to possess the other half of my sigil.

Then she raised her eyes to mine—and the expression in their glowing depths shook me from crown to heels. Without thought, without a syllable being spoken, I opened my arms and gathered her into them in a passionate embrace. Her slender arms went about my neck, and her soft lips met mine in a long kiss of burning rapture.

MYSTERIOUS, overwhelming emotion had submerged every conscious thought in my mind. I did not wonder whence came this woman; I did not question the strange fact of our instinc-

tive embrace. I knew only a fierce, burning joy, an inexpressible passion—until the kiss ended.

Then, as though only the contact of our lips had held it at bay, my earlier panic swept back over me, and I raised my eyes again to the towering figure in sable armor there in the center of the room. Dusk was thickening rapidly, now, and the confusion of shadows in that place made it impossible to distinguish any object clearly. Yet I could have sworn I saw that figure move!

The great, square-shouldered body seemed to turn slowly in its saddle, until the visored helmet was facing toward me; and I felt as though a pair of ferocious eyes were glaring at me out of the slits in the steel. My nerves tensed in answer to a voiceless warning—and then relaxed as a soft, musical voice brought me back to the girl in my arms.

"We have found each other!" she cried, and pressed her cheek close against my chest. "Thank heaven—at last!"

I can give no truly logical account of what followed that evening. If there is coherence in my telling of what happened, it is a coherence gained in retrospect. Looking back, I seem to myself to have gone through that period like a drugged person, with my critical faculties almost completely in abeyance—only occasionally rising to some degree of objectivity.

At those times it was as though I had suddenly awakened from a strange, enthralling dream; and I looked about me with wondering eyes to find conditions still as they had been in my dream.

The first of these periods of comparative lucidity occurred just as we were entering my apartment—for we had come as instinctively to my home as we had gone into each other's arms. As I opened the door for her, and crossed the threshold after her, I had that initial sensation of emerging from a dream. I stopped, and gently taking her shoulders in my hands, I turned her about until her calm, luminous dark eyes were gazing into mine.

I stared at her, my awakened brain overwhelmed with the joyful assurance that it was not a dream—that this miraculous thing was true and concrete. Again I took her in my arms and kissed her, and my burning delight was doubled in the knowledge of the realness of that embrace.

"Tell me," I said then, "what has happened to us? Who are you? What is your name?"

Her reaction to my questions was strange and alarming. "She fell away

from me a step or two, her expression one of frightened incredulity.

"But don't you know?" she gasped. "Is it possible that you don't know me, Reinald?"

A coldness crept into my heart. Was it to end, so soon? Was this miraculous happiness, this perfect love that had come to me the result of some ghastly mistake—some ridiculous and tragic error in identity? No, no! That was unthinkable. I could never relinquish this girl, whether she had mistaken me for some else, or not. She was mine, and I would never give her up to any man!

"I—I am sure I do, really," I said haltingly, but my eyes retreated from hers, and I stared at the floor as I went on with my awkward lie. "I feel that I have always known you—that we have been intended for each other since the beginning of time. But—but I can't think of your name . . ."

She came close to me again, and caught the lapels of my coat as she gazed questioningly up into my eyes.

"And your name—it is Reinald, isn't it?"

I saw it was no use. I might successfully delude her about my ignorance concerning her; but she was sure to discover my real name.

"No," I said miserably, "my name is not Reinald. It is Roger—Roger Kennaston."

She gave a start, but at mention of my family name she cried out, with a little scream of joy, and flung arms about my neck.

"But, of course!" she laughed. "Your name would not be Reinald—now! You are Kennaston, though—and Reinald and Roger—and the White Knight!"

I stiffened with a jerk—remembering the white-armored knight in the little warrior group at the curio shop—as a sensation like an electric shock shot through me.

"The White Knight!" I cried. "Oh, why can't I remember?"

Ancestral voices seemed to be whispering in my brain. Where had I heard of the White Knight? It had some immediate, personal significance to me—that much I knew. But full knowledge, or remembrance, remained tantalizingly just beyond my reach.

The girl, her face sober again, was looking up at me. "It is strange, very strange," she said, "that I should remember, and you not. May be in time . . . But perhaps it is better so, for a while, anyhow. We do not know yet—what the future holds for us. It may be—"

Suddenly she shivered, and her lumi-

nous eyes closed in an expression of pain as her fingers tightened on my arms.

"But no," she went on, after a moment, opening her eyes, and gazing at me with a curiously pleading expression. "The fates wouldn't be so unkind to us—now . . ."

I must have looked my helpless, fearful puzzlement, for presently she gave another little laugh, and breaking away from me led me to the divan and made me sit down beside her. Then she turned so that she was facing me squarely, and with an assumption of mock gravity, said:

"My name is Marion Horvendile, and I am glad to meet you, Mr. Kennaston!"

She looked at me with queer expectancy, but if she supposed that mention of her name would restore recollection of whatever it was she wanted me to remember, she was doomed to disappointment. But I no longer feared losing her. I could afford to be honest.

"It's no use," I said. "I can't seem to remember—anything."

At that moment Edna, my housekeeper, appeared at the door of the library.

"Mr. Kennaston," she said, with a note of alarm in her voice, "are you ill, sir?"

I looked up at her. "Why, no, Edna," I said. "What makes you ask that?" Then, without paying much attention to what she answered, my mind went ahead with the suddenly posed problem of her presence. I knew that her Puritan soul was undoubtedly shocked at this lovely girl and I sitting so closely together. My housekeeper did not even look at the girl—ignoring her, as I thought, as an automatic response to her own rigid inhibitions. For it must have scandalized her that we were alone together—at night.

I smiled at the girl, then turned and said to Edna: "I'm afraid I'll have to let you go. I'll give you a check for three months' salary, and you can pack and go out to your sister's place tonight—if that won't be too much of an inconvenience for you."

Edna gulped. "Oh! . . . Oh—no inconvenience, sir! I hope I haven't offended?"

"Not at all," I assured her. "You have been very satisfactory in every way—but I won't be needing you any more, Edna."

"Very well, sir," said Edna, and disappeared from the doorway.

I turned and gathered Marion once more into my arms, kissed her with the joyous passion of perfectly requited love. But something as yet unrecognized, and unacknowledged, had been planted deep in my brain.

My housekeeper had somehow stirred

to somber, glowering life the shadows that had swept to and fro over my soul that afternoon. A distant, submerged part of my consciousness was whispering something, and a faint and ghostly tocsin was ringing in my brain . . .

THE reasoning, critical part of my mind was all but inoperative that night. Neither of us was concerned about anything in the world but the rapture we found in each other's arms. The rest of the world did not exist.

At last, her silky hair caressing my cheek, her small head nestling in the hollow of my shoulder, Marion fell asleep in my arms. Her regular breathing, marked by the soft fanning of her perfumed breath on my neck lulled me into the borderland sleeping and waking. For awhile, however, I did not slip into unconsciousness.

My room was faintly illuminated by the reflected glow of street lamps which filtered in through the windows. It was just enough light to create a horde of inky shadows, but in my dreamy, half-sleeping state I was conscious only of one. My eyes were closed, but as clearly as though I were watching it, I sensed the presence of that one shadow—deeper, more definitely formed than the others—looming beside the nearest window.

I felt it as a malevolent entity, the agent of evil and terror—and over my dulled consciousness crept the vague, formless fears that had assailed me in the museum, that had come incessantly to plague and torture me at intervals all evening.

All the terror I had felt returned now, increased and intensified, and seemed to concentrate itself on that stygian, looming figure there by the window. I wanted to open my eyes, to assure myself, childishly, that there was really nothing there—but I could not.

And now I felt that the shadow was moving toward me. Distinctly I knew that it had detached itself from the window, that it was advancing with a curiously muted clanking sound toward the girl and me—and I was powerless to move a muscle. Then I felt the great black figure hovering over us, bending slowly downward.

A soundless shriek was tearing at my throat, for I knew, now, the identity of that fearsome form—but I could make no outcry. It was as though I were bound and gagged, and my brain seethed in a torment of rage and terror at my helplessness.

The black figure stooped, and rose erect again. It retreated toward the window from whence it had come, but this time

it did not linger there. It passed beyond, whether through the window, or in what means, I did not know. I only knew that it had gone, and that it had left a fearful, horrible void behind it.

In that instant I roused to full wakefulness. I had the momentary vision of a shadowy figure at the window—a towering form of deepest black with immense shoulders, a great rounded head topped by a spray of sable plumes. It vanished, and the sudden clatter of horse's hoofs reached my ears, died away in the distance.

Instinctively I reached over to touch Marion, to assure myself that this thing had been but a figment of my imagination, a sort of semi-waking dream. My questing hand moved only through empty space. I leaped up, turned on lights, searched everywhere. But Marion was gone.

IT never occurred to me to question what had happened to her, or where she had been taken. Like a frenzied maniac I stamped shoes onto my bare feet, flung a top-coat over my pajamas. Within seconds I was racing down the street as though fiends were riding my shoulders.

Whether I encountered anyone or not, I do not know. It seemed to me that I traveled with the speed of thought, for the next thing I knew I was standing in a little clump of trees near the great north wing of the Metropolitan Museum, gazing steadfastly at a small door that opened, I knew, directly onto the armor room.

A moment I hesitated, searching the windows for sign of a light inside. There was none. Swiftly, but on tiptoe, I sped to the door, threw my weight against it as I turned the knob.

Easily it swung inward, and I almost fell to the floor as I staggered inside. Surprised that the door should be unlocked, but giving this no thought, I straightened up, and the door swung noiselessly closed behind me.

The darkness of that place was a tangible, palpable thing. I felt as though I were submerged in a sea of ink; that the blackness was invading my throat and nostrils, suffocating me. And then every muscle in my body snapped to the tension of a drawn bow-string.

There was a slight noise behind me—the scrape of metal on wood. I whirled, probed the darkness with aching, blind eyes. The noise was repeated, closer to me, and was followed by a muffled clank.

Cautiously I backed away, the infinitesimal sound that my shoe made, in contact with the floor, sounding in my ears

like the tramping of armies. I took another step—and the metallic sounds followed me.

Terror hung like a cold leaden ball in my stomach, but I came to a halt. Whatever this thing was that followed me in the dark, it had some connection with Marion's disappearance. If I were ever to hold her in my arms again, it must be faced and conquered.

I gathered myself together, and strained my ears for the next sound that would give me a more definite idea of the location of my enemy. It came—and I hurled myself forward in the darkness.

My body traveled perhaps two feet, then such a blast of pain shot through me as almost to rob me of my senses. It was as though two iron clamps had swept out of the night and crashed my throat on either side. I was held by the neck, my body a dead weight, suspended as though from a steel gibbet, while my senses swam and agony swept my head and torso like a flight of poisoned arrows.

I was held so but for a moment, or I would have strangled and died on the spot. Then the clamps descended to my shoulders and whirled me about. My right arm was twisted upward in a torturing hammer-lock, and a powerful push propelled me staggering forward.

Seemingly my captor could see in the dark; for he guided me, with painful twists and thrusts, a considerable distance over the floor. I had the impulse to cry out for one of the night guards. But as though my antagonist had divined my thought, my arm was suddenly given a terrific wrench.

Finally I was jerked to a stop, and a door, beyond which came a faint illumination, was suddenly swung open. I was given a final powerful shove. I staggered into the room under the force of it, lost my footing, and crashed to the floor. For a moment I lay there stunned—and then a cry of anguish brought me springing to my feet.

In front of me was Marion, her wrists and ankles gyvved to the wall with iron cuffs, her white and rose-tinted body showing through long rents in her torn clothing. Her dark eyes, flooded with anguish, looked at me in pitiful helplessness.

With a curse of ferocious rage, I started toward her—only to be jerked violently backward and then hurled, as though from a giant catapult, to the opposite side of the room. I fell at the foot of a cross-shaped rack.

Before I could regain my feet, I was jerked to them, and my wrists and ankles were chained to the rack. Then, and not until then, so stunned was I from pain

and shock, did I get a look at my captor.

His darkly handsome visage peered sardonically at me from beneath the raised visor of his helmet, as he took a step backward and rested his steel-gauntleted knuckles upon his hips. He was clad from head to toes in black gleaming armor—and I knew it to be the armor that normally occupied the center of the mounted group in the adjacent room.

"Faith—'tis a lively rogue," he remarked in a deep, amused voice, and swung away from me to go clanking over the floor until he stood before Marion.

"I must needs leave thee, my love," he said, bending over her a little. "But weep not—ere long I'll return."

He chuckled, and turning about strode to the door, opened it, and disappeared into the blackness beyond, the door swinging noiselessly shut behind him.

Wildly I swept my eyes about the place, before I fixed them in tortured anxiety on Marion. We were, I knew, in the room housing the museum's collection of inquisitional and barbaric torture devices. The grim instruments hung on the walls and rested on the floor all about us. The dim, fitful light was supplied by a spluttering link fastened over an ancient forge, which held a bed of glowing coals. It was insane, impossible, but it was none the less very clear that here in the heart of the world's most modern city we were about to be subjected to the sort of treatment that despots of the Middle Ages meted out to the unfortunate beings who had incurred their displeasure.

"Good Lord, Marion!" I groaned. "What does all this mean? Who is that devil in the black armor?"

THE girl's answer was a moan of anguish. "I thank heaven that you do not remember, Reinald," she sobbed. "It makes it easier for me—knowing that you cannot guess what is coming . . ."

"But tell me—tell me!" I implored. "Anything is better than all this ghastly mystery, Marion. What is happening to us—and why do you call me Reinald?"

She was silent for a long time, and I thought that she was not going to answer me. But at last she began talking in a low, sorrowful tone, her accents so mournful and hopeless as to make me long to take her in my arms and comfort her.

"It was long, long ago that it all began," she said. "My father, the Sieur de Horvendile, pledged my hand in marriage to Perion de Montors. I hated him—because I loved you. But my father was facing ruin, and I knew that he would kill himself if I disobeyed him and ran away with you—as you begged me to do. I loved

my father, and foolishly I let that lesser love ruin both our lives . . .

"But on the night before the day that was set for our wedding, I took you to an old magician who lived in the neighborhood. He mumbled words over us and threw a handful of evil-smelling powder into a cauldron that was steaming over the fire. Then, with a pair of tongs he reached into the cauldron and drew out a little gold medallion which he called a sigil of Narl. After it had cooled he broke it with a hammer, then gave each of us half.

"He said that the fates had decreed that our love was not to be consummated in this life—but that, by aid of the sigil, we would be drawn together in every reincarnation after that one.

"There was one condition which, he said, we dared not transgress. We were to reconcile ourselves to being apart in that life—and if we should consummate our love in violation of the condition, it would give our enemy power to separate us in every subsequent incarnation.

"We gave little heed to the sorcerer's words, but we vowed to each other always to keep our halves of the sigil, for it seemed to establish a mystic bond between us . . .

"I married Perion de Montors, and you went away to the wars. It was years before I saw you again—and my life had been one long night of tortured yearning for the sight of you, and the feel of your strong, gentle arms about me. When, at last, you came to me I could stand it no longer. I threw myself into your arms, begging you to take me away . . .

"One night we had together—one night that was worth all our years of waiting. We had pitched our little tent beside a brook, and in each other's arms beside that rippling stream we tasted the joys of paradise—but, before the sun rose, Perion's hordes were upon us. We were caught asleep, bound, mounted on horses and taken back to the castle. After that—"

Marion's voice quavered to silence, and I had not the courage, then, to ask her to go on. A shudder of premonitory dread shook me so that the chains which bound my wrists to the rack jangled discordantly. And yet, I doubted. Could this strange thing be? Was it really possible that Marion and I had known and loved each other in a life before this?

As though she had read my thoughts, Marion presently resumed.

"We were—separated," she said in so low a tone that her voice barely reached my ears. "Not only in that life, but in a half-dozen lives thereafter. The vengeful hatred of Perion de Montors has pursued

us down the ages. Yet no one of the three of us has realized what forces have been drawing us together—and then separating us.

"After that first night my half of the sigil mysteriously disappeared, but always I have found you in possession of your half. I have thought that, perhaps, if I could recover my portion of it, we would not again be separated. Oh, to think I was so near to regaining it only yesterday!

"When I was last upon the earth I got an inkling of the fate that has followed us for centuries, through an old family document that had long been stored in an ancient chest. The document told the story of that medieval Marion de Horvendile and her lover, Reinald Kennaston. It said that the curse that was upon us could be revoked only by one gifted in the black arts. I went to one such, and he told me that only after my death could I dissolve the spell of our doom.

"He gave me a cantrap that would enable me to return to earth in material form. I was to seek you out—and the spell would be broken if, for longer than one night, we could remain in each other's arms . . .

"We have failed . . . Whether it is because the armor of Perion de Montors was in the room where we met—and his restless, warlike spirit doubtless close by—I do not know. But once more, my lover, we are to taste the undying hatred of the Black Knight."

"Truly spoken, fair lady!" The deep voice of the man Marion called the Black Knight came from the doorway, but the note of ironical humor that had been in it before, was gone now. His right hand clutched a whip which, as he now came forward, he snapped viciously in the air; and I saw Marion cringe as if it had struck her flesh.

As I gazed at her beautiful, terror-rigid body my mind was a seething welter of doubt, horrible foreboding, and pity. If her story were true, she not only was about to endure something unimaginably dreadful—but she knew with terrible precision exactly what to expect.

THE Black Knight stood over the body of Marion and gazed down at her gleaming skin that showed through her torn dress—and he stared with blazing, wolfish eyes. I raved and cursed. I called him every vile name I could remember, hoping to sting him into turning his attention to me. But he contemptuously ignored me. He was speaking to Marion, so finally I fell silent so that I could hear what he was saying.

"Thou wilt receive my embraces here

and now, fair one," he said, "or taste the whip. Yon mewling knave shall see with what joy thou shalt welcome thy rightful mate to thine arms."

"No, no!" screamed Marion. "For the love of heaven have pity, Montors! Must you torture us to the end of time—only because we love each other?"

"Aye—and beyond!" he roared, his dark face turning even blacker as her admission of her love for me whipped blood into it. Then he swung the many-tailed whip downward, its vicious strands whistling through the air to crack horribly against Marion's tender flesh.

I screamed and lurched forward with all my strength against the rusty iron chains that bound me; but Marion compressed her lips tightly, and although she could not control the tortured writhing of her body, she made not a sound.

Again the whip descended, and my screams turned to tearing sobs. Marion's creamy skin showed livid welts where the whip had struck, but still she made no outcry.

The Black Knight paused, glowering down at her.

I never ceased a moment to struggle with my chains, and now I noticed something that, in my frenzy, I had not seen before. There was really only one chain that bound me. It started at my right hand, went through a hole bored in the rack, emerged through a similar hole at my left hand, disappeared in another after encircling my wrist, and went downward across the back side of the rack to bind my ankles in the same manner to the lower bars. The chain was hundreds of years old. Once ten men could not have broken it—but now . . .

Suddenly I became very quiet. Covertly I inspected every link I could see. If I could find a promising point on which to exert concentrated pressure . . .

But now the Black Knight was plying the whip again—and to save my soul I could not drag my agonized eyes from the ghastly spectacle, although I continued to strain against my bonds.

Soon Marion's body was horribly cross-hatched with a livid network of welts. The fiend who towered above her was sweating with his efforts, and his face was a devilish mask in which brutal rage and lustful relish in his work were insanely mingled. At last he desisted and stood, again, looking down at her.

Marion's writhing had ceased. She was limp and quiet.

"Bah!" grunted her torturer, and flung his bloody whip to the floor with a gesture of disgust. "'Tis purile child's play! A taste of hot iron will rouse thee, my love!"

With the fascination of icy horror, I watched silently while he went to the old forge beneath the link, and with an ancient, wheezing bellows, fanned the glowing coals to a cherry heat. He selected a pike from a collection racked against the wall, and thrust its tip into the fire, working the bellows methodically, its eerie hissing freezing my heart with maniacal terror.

At last he drew forth the pike, its orange-yellow heat throwing a nimbus of hellish light on his grinding, satanic face as he approached the still motionless form of my adored one.

A ghastly paralysis held me motionless. I think that I was as mad in that interval as any inmate of a violent ward—with a madness that had stricken me with impotence to move a muscle. My jaw hung open and my eyes stared like an idiot's Perion de Montors thrust the sizzling tip of the pike into Marion's left armpit.

My body contracted like a many-coiled spring, as if that brutal iron had touched my flesh instead of Marion's. The weight of my horror had driven me mad—and now it gave me the strength of a madman. With one titanic surge I crashed out of my chains as though they were cobwebs, and hurled myself across the floor at Marion's torturer like a fury escaped from hell's torment.

The noise of my escape had given Perion de Montors a moment to prepare for my attack. He whirled and slashed out at me with the pike. It caught me on the shoulder, and its still red-hot iron seared my cheek as its weight seemed to crack my collarbone. But a thousand could not have stopped me. In the next instant I was upon him, my fingers clawing for his throat, the cry of a wild beast hissing from my lips.

He jerked sidewise away from me, and the very precipitousness of my attack aided him to escape me momentarily. He whirled about and dashed to a corner of the room, snatching a heavy, two-handed sword from the floor.

I had enough sense to pause, then, and snatch up a great battle-axe before returning to the attack. I rushed upon him with it raised over my head in both hands, seeking to brain him with it before he could bring his cumbersome sword into play. But he was ready for me. His sword swung up, parrying my blow, then swept in a vicious, short arc against my body, crashing with agonizing force into my ribs.

I staggered and went down, falling on the staff of my axe as I did so, and breaking it off short in my hand.

Instantly the black-garbed fiend was at

me. He flung himself upon my body and lifted his sword high in the air. Fascinated, my eyes watched it rise aloft, begin to descend. Then I realized that the blade, and about two feet of the axe staff yet remained in my hand. As the sword crashed down I thrust upward at the throat of my adversary, and saw the point of the axe bury itself in his neck, just as the sword struck the side of my head and a sheet of white fire seemed to blanket my skull before darkness and unconsciousness flooded over it

THEY told me that it was all a delusion brought about by my nervous break-down. The psychiatrist, whose special charge I was, told me I must believe that, or I would never get well. Time after time he pointed out to me that the things I had raved about in my periods of hysteria, and that I insisted upon reiterating even in my more rational moments, could not have occurred.

I had merely become the victim of an obsession—a common enough thing. The state of my nerves, coupled with the hold on my imagination exerted by the armor of the museum, had resulted in a series of hallucinations that had seemed remarkably real to me.

I was not convinced. But the evidence continued to pile up. The psychiatrist pointed out that the things I insisted had taken place in the torture room of the museum would certainly have left some sign of their having occurred. But the force gave no evidence of having had a fire in it; the link had not been lighted for centuries—and showed it; the chains of the rack remained as they had been for innumerable decades—rusty and weakened, but not broken.

It was true that I had wandered into the museum after nightfall—apparently by means of a door left open by a careless guard—stumbled about in the dark and fallen, hitting my head against an old sword that lay on the floor. But that proved nothing but that my obsession had been of extraordinary strength

Because this all sounded very reasonable—and because, at length, I knew I must believe the psychiatrist if I were to recover—I tried to force the proposition into my consciousness that, indeed, it had been just an hallucination. But it was slow work, and it was many weeks before my mind and my heart would accept it—and it was my heart that was the more reluctant.

For, impervious to all reasoning and explanations, love for Marion lingered, unconquerably. Somehow, I felt that she was not totally lost to me, if some shred of faith remained. But at last I steeled

my heart, and forced her image from it. The next day the psychiatrist pronounced me cured, and I left for my home

Perhaps, because for so many weeks I had been a total stranger to mental repose, and had been unable to marshall my thoughts into anything remotely resembling coherence, it was not until I was on the train that a thing occurred to me that, long since, should have appealed to me as significant.

I suddenly remembered a name—the name of the man the antique dealer claimed had put a deposit on the half of the sigil he owned. It was similar to another name—which had fallen from the lips of my beloved Marion. P. Montors, the dealer had said, was the man who wished to purchase the sigil. And Perion de Montors was the name of the ancient enemy Marion said, had pursued us down the ages.

From whatever sort of hallucinations I had suffered, they would hardly have encompassed such a coincidence as that!

My first act, upon arriving in New York, was to visit the shop where I had seen the Gottschalk group, and, later, the sigil. The old Frenchman was still there.

"Ah, *M'sieu*!" he greeted me warmly. "You are back at last!"

So he remembered me! It could not, then, have been an illusion that I had visited this shop

"I am so happy to see you," went on the little Frenchman ecstatically. "I feared that you would never return—or the pretty young lady, either. It was so strange! Three customers demand my little gold luck piece. Then *pouf!* they run away and I am left with no customers—*tout a fait!*"

"Do you mean you still have it?" I asked huskily, and my knees were suddenly warm and weak as a fearful joy suffused my body.

"*Mais oui!*"

The little man turned and ran quickly toward the back of the shop. He returned in an instant bearing in his hands the black velvet case. He laid it in my hands, and with fingers that shook violently, I opened it. The sigil was there, as it had been before—the mate to the half that was mine!

"*M'sieu*' Montors, he has never re-

turned," said the Frenchman. "I have enquire at the *Musée*—where I am told that *M'sieu*' Montors he have been kill in an auto. His car hit one other, and a beeg splinter of wood from his broken steering wheel she kill him through the neck. The deposit was to hold it but for a few days—and now you may have the charm if you wish to—"

I shivered involuntarily, weird sensations gripping my heart and mind. Killed—through the neck. That—that was how I had dealt a blow to the Black Knight—with the point of that broken axe staff. And my eyes went to the Mediaeval group of miniature battling warriors in the window of the store. I decided then that I would buy the tableau as a memento of my strange and inexplicable experience.

"To give it to me," said a soft voice at my side. "Otherwise, I shall buy it myself—even though it cost all the wealth in the world!"

I whirled—and then fell back against the counter. My head reeled with the sudden, terrific pounding of my heart, and a cry that was both a sob and a paean of thanksgiving burst from my throat. In the next instant Marion was in my arms that for weeks had ached to hold her, with a horrible, hopeless pain

She stirred after a moment and gave a little laugh. "You must not hold me so tightly, Reinald," she said. "It hurts a little. You see, dear, I have been in the hospital"

I grasped her shoulders and held her so that I could look into her eyes.

"Why—" I gasped—"why have you been in the hospital, Marion?"

For a long moment she gazed back into my eyes, and in her own I could see the flitting shadows of old pain, and strange, unfathomable mystery.

"They told me that I was in a fire," she said softly. "I do not remember, for I slept so deeply that even the pain did not rouse me. And it was only afterward—in the hospital—that I knew what had happened."

"You were burned?" I said. "Where were you burned, Marion? Beneath the left arm?"

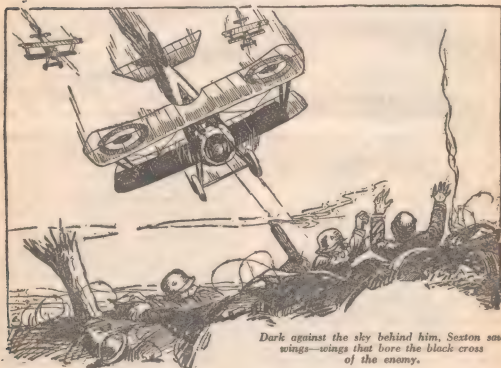
"Yes," she whispered, "how did you know?" and crept into my arms again, as a shudder shook her sweet, slender body. "Beneath the left arm"



• Flying

Medals to the Craven

Powerful Novelette of War Skies



Dark against the sky behind him, Sexton saw wings—wings that bore the black cross of the enemy.

By Major George Fielding Eliot

Four victories in the skies of war were already chalked up to the credit of Lieutenant Bob Sexton. And now in his gunsights was lined up the body of Germany's famous Gerhard, whose death would make Sexton an Ace. But the stream of lead that blasted forth from Sexton's gun muzzles won a medal for another man—and gave Sexton a "descendu" which he never could claim!

BOB SEXTON concentrated all his powers of air-vision on the little fleck of scarlet in the evening sky. The colored spot was far ahead—and well below the eight-thousand-foot level at

which Sexton and his companion, Bill Dorn, were flying.

If it were indeed the German ace, Gerhard, and his famous Red-Wing monoplane, then, for the first time Sexton had

ever heard of, the great Boche flyer had been caught at a disadvantage.

Sexton's heart leaped at the idea. He already had four victories to his credit—not a bad record for the short time he'd been flying at the Front—but to get Gerhardt would be an accolade beyond all price. It would be realization of the fond dream of every Yankee *chasse* pilot in the sector. And it would make him an ace!

His Nieuport was humming with increased speed. Looking back, he saw Dorn sticking close to his tail. He nodded with satisfaction. Dorn was a vain young flyer, likely to be undependable in pinches because of his erratic habits of mind. He had no Boche scalps at his belt, as yet, no victories to boast of to the mam'selles who admired his handsome face, and this fact was a rankling source of grief to him. If only he didn't go haywire now! Sexton would need him to back up his attack; perhaps it would be Dorn's fate to get Gerhardt as the German tried to avoid Sexton's dive. But Dorn must be there, in his proper place, to make deadly sure that the German ace should not escape. That was what mattered to Sexton.

The fleck of scarlet upon which Sexton's attention was riveted flashed brighter in the dying sunlight—and he was sure. He could not mistake the shape of those wings as the plane banked. It was Gerhardt's Red-Wing.

Waving to Dorn to follow, Sexton rudered a course which, while slowly losing altitude, would put him in a position for a quick drive on Gerhardt's tail.

His heart was hammering at his chest wall like a trip-hammer, but his hand was steady on the stick, and his eye never left his quarry.

Gerhardt cruised slowly along, apparently quite off his guard, all unconscious of the eager death that swooped above him.

But if the German ace had forgotten caution for once in his wary life, the German anti-craft gunners on the ground were more alert. They saw his danger, and they did their best to warn him.

Sexton's Nieuport jerked suddenly at the air-cushioned impact of a close burst, and the hoarse cough of other bursting shells followed in quick succession. The battery was firing rapidly, more anxious to warn Gerhardt than to hit the Yank planes.

The sky was full of drifting balls of black smoke, and others were constantly arriving, born of the pale, deadly flame of high-explosive at their hearts.

Sexton, like many pilots, had acquired an utter disregard for the futile menace of Archie fire. Not so, he knew, with

Dorn. Shell-fire was the one thing Dorn could not stand. His high-strung nerves went all to pieces when he was subjected to it. So Sexton looked anxiously back over his shoulder—and swore aloud as he saw Dorn zooming up and away.

By this time, of course, Gerhardt had come out of his dream and had spotted the American planes. But seeing only two enemies, and they far apart, the Boche decided, with the magnificent audacity which was his most pronounced characteristic, to attack. Up he came, gallantly enough, while the disgusted Sexton, cheated of his surprise by the alert artillery and by his panicky partner of superiority in numbers, swung away to meet maneuver with maneuver.

He was hoping now for nothing better than to hold Gerhardt in play until Dorn recovered from his jitters and came down to take his part in the scrap.

SINCE the Archie fire had slackened as the German plane approached Sexton's, Sexton had some hope that Dorn would chip in. Knowing that the German's far greater experience gave him a considerable advantage in combat, Sexton nevertheless drove in to attack without an instant's hesitation. Twice the red plane avoided his tracer streams by last-minute dodges; then, by a quick side-loop, Gerhardt gained the upper position, and Sexton saw flaming bullets ripping through his own wing fabric not more than inches from his cockpit.

He banked away, letting the German dive past him, and came down on Gerhardt's tail. But the wily Boche increased the angle of his dive and went earthward, nose down, at a terrific rate—well aware of the weakness of Nieuport wings, confident that Sexton would not dare follow him at such speed.

Sexton saw Dorn diving at an angle which would intercept the German's dive, and he knew why Gerhardt was trying to get away. Dorn's tracer flickered below him—flickered and missed. The red wings fell on, untouched.

Sexton slammed his stick forward and let the Nieuport go. The wind of his fall screamed in his wires. Unheeding, jaw set like a rock, he whirled down upon Gerhardt, who now was just pulling his ship out of the long dive. Too late he looked up and saw Sexton; too late he swerved.

Sexton's eye saw Gerhardt's startled face in the center of his ring sight; his thumb closed on his trigger-button, he saw that face dissolve in a welter of splattered blood. The Red-Wing plane whipped over and plunged down in a dive from which there was no hand to bring

it out. A dead ace rode in the cockpit to an airman's finish.

Sexton was tugging now at his own stick, holding his rudder amidships. The Nieuport bucked like a spurred bronc, fighting the bumpy air, but her nose came up. Sexton was drawing in a long breath of relief and triumph when he heard a terrific ripping sound. The Nieuport staggered and sideslipped sickeningly.

One glance to the left was enough. The fabric was tearing itself from the upper wing in long strips. That fast dive had done its work.

As Sexton looked, a row of holes appeared in the lower wing. He realized that he was but fifteen hundred feet above the ground—German ground, into which a famous German ace had just smashed, and was burning, over there where the smoke crawled skyward in black funeral spirals. The German machine-gunners were bent on vengeance!

Sexton, nursing his ship along, tried to gain a little more altitude. The wing ripped more.

"Guess I'll just have to rock along here and take it," he told himself grimly.

He was flying the Nieuport heavily over on the right wing, taking all the strain he could off the damaged one. Machine-gun bullets chipped his struts, tore through his tail-assembly, filled the air with ominous whisperings of death.

It was drawing a little darker. In that there was hope. Sexton held his course, and prayed that the ship would hold together until he'd crossed the lines. He didn't bother looking around for Dorn. Dorn had failed him when he was needed; he could be of no service now.

Expecting every minute to feel those merciless bullets smashing into his body, Sexton held on. He could see the lines; they were not far ahead. American shells were bursting on the earth beneath him. The machine-gun fire was slackening.

Now he saw, dimly in the gathering dusk, the front-line bands of opposing wire and the desolate shell-pocked stretch of No-Man's-Land between.

A little more, and he'd be safe. The fabric was still tearing from the weakened wing, whipping out behind in long streamers; but the lower wing was holding, and the plane was flying. And even if it were losing altitude, rather than gaining, Sexton began to believe he had enough margin to win clear through to his own drome.

EVENING settled darker; lower and lower sank the Nieuport, slipping downward a yard at a time. Hedgehopping home on one wing is a task to try

the stoutest nerves, the steadiest hand. But Sexton had both. And he was sustained by a triumphant beat of exultation in his young veins—he'd downed Gerhardt! What did he care for stripped wings and failing motors? His was the victory! He thought of the roaring mess-shack that night while his squadron drank his health, with himself standing on the table. He was neither vainglorious nor selfish, but he would not have been human had he not looked forward to the reward of his success, the reward far dearer to his heart than the medal a grateful government would give him—the acclaim of his comrades. That was worth any pain, any labor, any risk.

He looked down at the dark earth. Alarming close it seemed. His altimeter had dropped to five hundred feet.

"I'd better hit a good road and try taxiing in," he told himself. "I'll be doing it, too, if this damn sideslip can't be checked."

But he couldn't. He couldn't fly at any easier angle; he couldn't rise; he couldn't speed up. The Nieuport would fly the way it was, or not at all.

"I'll either just make, or just miss," was Sexton's calculation.

He'd have tried an emergency landing if he could have seen the ground clearly enough. Not being able to, he decided his own drome was the best bet. The plane labored on.

SEXTON gasped suddenly, choking on a breath that seemed to sear his lungs. There was a sweetish odor in the air. His eyes burned, began to water. Gas! He was passing through a German gas concentration, laid behind the American lines during the fighting of the day. He was low enough to get, not the full benefit of the poisonous vapors, but a serious dose.

He tried not to breathe, tried to fly with his eyes shut. His lungs were torturing him, and he reeled in the seat, as the plane flopped helplessly.

This wouldn't do. He corrected stick and rudder, driving his muscles to their duty by sheer will power. But he couldn't help breathing again.

Luckily by this time he was almost out of the gas, or that breath might have been his last. As it was, he seemed to be breathing in distilled flame. Blinded by tears, choked and gasping from the noxious fumes, he flew more by instinct than by conscious effort.

Presently, as his vision cleared a little, he saw a rounded lump looming in the darkness ahead. It was a hangar. His undercarriage just cleared the roof of it.

He cut off his motor and eased the Nieuport downward.

His right wing tip hit the ground. The plane pitched forward, hit with terrific force, nosed over. Sexton's safety-belt broke, and he was flung out on his own tarmac with a violence that drove every ounce of breath from his body.

He lay there, fighting for air, suffering the torments of the damned, dimly aware of another plane roaring down, cutting off for a landing, smacking the tarmac neatly in a three-pointer. That must be Dorn.

They were shouting, over by the hangars. Men were coming on the run. He could hear the thud of their feet on the hard ground.

He sat up. His inflamed eyes peered through the half-darkness, saw dimly the form of a man—another. A face swam before his vision—the concerned, sober face of his squadron commander, Major Bassett. And there was Bill Dorn, looking rather scared. Afraid Sexton would report him, maybe.

Sexton tried to tell his great news. But from his gas-seared throat there came only a hoarse squawk, of which but a single word was plain: "Gerhardt!"

His hand went out in a helpless gesture, pointing at Dorn. Dorn would tell them what had happened. The void closed round him.

IT was a full month later that Bob Sexton walked slowly down the steps of a base hospital far behind the fighting lines, with his orders for "back to duty" in his pocket.

He was taking things easily. It was a fine, bright, sunny day, with the tang of autumn in the air; and he had freedom from hospital routine, from fussy doctors, from pain. It was good to see again, too. They'd kept his eyes bandaged so long. And to fly again! That would be good!

He glanced at his watch, quickened his step a little. Wouldn't do to miss his train. He wanted to get back to the squadron, to his pals, his ship—and the delayed celebration of the Gerhardt victory.

He'd had no news from the outfit. War flyers have little time to write letters, and the hospital was too far from the Front to enable the gang to visit him. It didn't matter—he'd soon be back.

He reached the station, presented his transportation order, passed on to the platform.

"Hi, Bob!" A young pilot came running toward him, musette bag flopping awkwardly on one hip. He beamed. This

was luck. It was Owens, of his own squadron. Owens began talking.

"On your way to the drome again, hey, Bob? Swell stuff! We need you. I've just had four days in Nice! What a leave, boy, what a leave! Now it's back to the grind, and more guff from that ass Dorn. The major made him leader of B Flight for downing Gerhardt, and his head's swelled up bigger'n a *Drachen*."

"What?"

"Sure's you're a foot high, feller. Chesty Dorn's a flight leader, complete with D.S.C. and inflated ego. Dunno how he ever nailed a smart guy like Gerhardt. But what the hell, Bob, that's war! How did he do it, anyhow? You were there. Give us the lowdown."

While words were still choking each other for utterance in Sexton's congested throat, the warning shout of the conductor gave him respite.

"En voiture! En voiture, messieurs!"

He and Owens jammed their way into a crowded compartment, found seats together.

"Confirmation came through all right on Dorn's victory, eh?" he asked in a dry voice as the train began to move.

"Yeah. Only at first we all thought it was you got the Hun," Owens grinned. "You were both out there, you know. It wasn't until you told the major yourself that Dorn did the job that we knew who to crown with laurel and what-have-you."

"I—told the major—that?" Sexton stared in stupefied astonishment at his garrulous comrade.

"Sure. I was there. Heard you myself. Sorta down-and-out, you were, what with the gas and your crack-up, but you gobbled out 'Gerhardt' and pointed at Dorn, like you were afraid he couldn't sound his own horn loud enough. He was real overcome and modest about it all at first, but he soon swelled up to his usual pouter-pigeon stuff. Yeah."

Sexton looked out of the window at the fields of France flashing by at the startling rate of twenty miles an hour. He saw now—everything. The major had made a natural mistake, and Dorn had taken advantage of it. Hadn't been able to resist the temptation to be a hero. Maybe he figured Sexton was done for, would never live to contest his claim.

"It wouldn't be so bad," Owens was saying, "if it weren't for the illustrated papers back home publishing Dorn's picture all over hell's half-acre and calling him America's peerless hero of the air, and the fan letters he gets from girls and kids and God knows who, full of mush and wind. He's the idol of every air-minded kid from Maine to California by this time. They're even talking about send-

ing him home as an instructor, for inspirational purposes. Can you beat that? Chesty Dorn—inspiration of the youth of America!" Owens made an impolite sound.

"Not so hot!" said Sexton.

But he had seen his duty, as he conceived it, had taken his decision. It was around such "idols" and such "inspirations" that the war-spirit, the driving spirit which was carrying America through this great struggle, upward and onward to victory, was crystallizing.

Dorn might not be a worthy hero. But the point was, the folks back home thought so. For Sexton to come out now and contest the Gerhardt victory would only make a nasty mess. He had no proof save his unsupported word against Dorn's, and Dorn would lie—lie with fluency and vigor—to save the false throne he had built for himself. He had doubtless spent a good deal of time since he'd heard, as he must have, that Sexton was recovering, planning his story, bolstering it up with this detail and that.

Sexton shrugged. "I hope," he said rather wearily, "that I don't get assigned to B Flight. I don't think I'd enjoy flying under Dorn."

It was a hope which was doomed to early disappointment.

MAJOR BASSETT received Sexton with open delight.

"Just the lad I need," he cried slapping Sexton on the back. "Im going to put you in B Flight. Dorn needs a steady flyer for deputy flight-leader. Just the spot for you, Sexton."

Sexton opened his mouth in protest, thought better of it, said, "Yes, sir," without enthusiasm. After all, it was his job to do what he was told. And the major evidently thought Dorn required steady-ing.

Several pilots came into the office to greet him while he was still talking to the major. Last of all came Dorn.

Dorn was rather white of face and notably defiant of manner; but when he gathered from the major's expression that Sexton had not made any revelations, he greeted Sexton with overdone effusion.

At mess that night, Sexton found Dorn's dark eyes upon him several times, and they were filled with troubled questions. Once he permitted his own gaze to drop to the D.S.C. ribbon on Dorn's chest, while a sardonic smile played about the corners of his own mouth. Dorn winced visibly. He was worried. He couldn't understand Sexton's attitude.

THAT week, B Flight had the early patrol. Early next morning Dorn led out four pilots besides himself, Sexton flying at the rear in the deputy leader's position. It was a routine patrol over ground well known to Sexton.

Sexton was a true flyer, never so happy as when in the air. Let Dorn have the glory. Sexton could fly and be happy and forget everything else in the sheer delight of flying.

The patrol was flying high that morning. Orders were to cross the lines at ten thousand feet, watching especially for German camera ships which were reported to be coming over for early shots of the new American trenches.

As the altimeter needle quivered past eight thousand, Sexton began to find difficulty in breathing. It took an unusual amount of effort to handle the controls. Funny! He hadn't thought even a long spell in hospital would leave his stout muscles as weak as all that.

At nine thousand feet, he was actually gasping for breath. Spots danced before his eyes, and he could scarcely see his instruments. The patrol seemed to be drawing away from him. He had a vague glimpse of other planes far ahead—maybe Germans. He kept driving the Nieuport upward.

His head was bursting with terrific pressure, as though caught in a giant vise. His lungs labored in vain for air, the hammering of his heart shook his body. The world was black. He could no longer see.

Putting his stick forward, he set his teeth and hung on. The Nieuport swooped down, down . . .

Gradually the awful pressure relaxed, and vision came back. Sexton drew in long, painful breaths of air. His lungs began to function, though the pain in his chest was still intense. At five thousand feet, he was breathing almost normally.

The patrol was nowhere in sight up there in the gray morning, but Sexton carried on over the required patrol route alone, between four and five thousand feet up.

And while he flew, he thought—bitter, terrible thoughts. It was plain to him what happened. The gas had affected his lungs, perhaps permanently. He could no longer breathe at the high altitudes which a war pilot must attain. He was through—through.

No! He hammered a violent fist on the padded coaming of his cockpit. He wouldn't admit it, yet. He'd try it again. Perhaps tomorrow morning things would be better. The first strain was over. Yes, that was it. He'd be all right.

HE headed back for the crome, arriving there about the same time that the rest of the gang came in.

Dorn walked up to him at once. "What happened to you Sexton?" he asked gruffly. "How come you pulled out of the formation just as we sighted Boche?"

"Engine trouble," Sexton snapped, reddening at the thinly disguised insinuation.

"Oh, I see," said Dorn with a peculiar smile. He hesitated—seemed about to say something else, then shrugged and turned away.

He walked off with a little swagger, as though trying to tell himself what hot stuff he was. Yet Sexton had seen the fear and the naked shame in his eyes, far back.

He knew that he himself must still be white and shaken from the experience he had gone through. Had Dorn guessed the truth? And did Dorn mean to use his knowledge to get rid of a man whose mere presence in the squadron must be, to him, at once a constant threat, and a constant reminder of his own treachery?

The following morning the patrol had the same orders. Dorn, speaking to the assembled pilots as they gulped their coffee, announced a variation of his own.

"Let's try a new stunt, fellows," he said. "Let's climb right up to fifteen thousand and go over so high that the camera buses can't spot us. Then, as it gets lighter, we'll drop down on 'em like a bolt from the blue. They got away from us yesterday. We'll get 'em today. What d'you think of the idea, Sexton?"

Dorn was not smiling as he looked at Sexton; his expression was rather one of hope—hope, perhaps, that Sexton would quit.

"Sounds all right to me," replied Sexton promptly, setting down his empty cup. "Let's go."

He managed to keep a poker face until he was in his plane—but fear clutched at his heart with icy fingers.

As he passed the five-thousand-foot level, he found himself trembling violently, waiting for the first gasp that would warn him that things were, after all, no better—that his curse was an abiding one.

At eight thousand it came—the same shortness of breath, the same sense of pressure about the head, the same heavy-handedness and lassitude. It came, and increased as the needle crawled slowly around the dial of the altimeter. Sexton tried to fight it off, tried to tell himself that it wasn't as bad as yesterday. But all the time he knew. It was worse, if anything.

He made a game fight. He stuck to his controls till a great numbness overcame him, till sight was blotted out and the world was a great red ball of agony and the stick slipped from relaxing fingers which would no longer answer the commands of his will.

He came to himself with a terrible wind beating at his face, found himself—true to an airman's instinct—tugging feebly at the stick even before he had regained his senses. The ship was spinning earthward in a crazy, screaming whirl. The altimeter was dropping to twenty-eight hundred as his dull eye fixed itself on that inexorable dial. He had fallen a good seven thousand feet.

Somehow he managed to bring the Nieuport out of the spin, to sane and level flight.

Despair abode in his soul. He went home, turned in his ship. Soon the major's orderly knocked at his door.

"C. O. wants to see you in his office, lieutenant."

DORN was standing by the major's desk as Sexton came in. His handsome face was set in an expression of judicial disapproval. And yet—the shame was still there.

The major looked at Sexton gravely. "Lieutenant Dorn reports," he said, "that on two successive mornings you have left the formation just before encountering enemy aircraft. Yesterday morning, he tells me, you reported engine trouble, which the mechanics were unable to find. I'd like to hear what you have to say."

Sexton would have died on the spot rather than admit, in Dorn's presence, the weakness which beset him—rather than speak the words which, he knew, would doom him never to fly a war plane again.

"I was taken suddenly ill, sir," he asserted, truthfully enough.

The major nodded. He looked a little less grave. The taut lines in his face relaxed.

"I thought it might be something like that," he answered. "You young fellows will never learn. You probably badgered the poor medico in that hospital morning, noon, and night, until he certified you fit for duty. You had a tough dose of gas, Sexton. You should have given yourself time to recover from it properly. Report to the medical officer, have him look you over, and take it easy for a while. There's a war on, of course, but don't overdo things. We can't afford to lose you."

"I've heard of cases where flyers who cracked up lost their nerve and were never any good afterward—when there

were German planes in sight, sir," put in Dorn.

The major turned slowly around and looked at the flight leader. He said nothing, but his look was filled with meaning.

Dorn began to stammer apologies, muttering that he didn't mean to insinuate anything—he was just making a remark.

Sexton thanked the major, went out and marched himself to the infirmary. He told the doctor nothing about shortness of breath at high altitudes; he complained of his stomach. He got a dose of medicine and some excellent advice on the subject of giving up alcoholic stimulant.

His next port of call was the *estaminet* in the near-by village, where he showed his high regard for medical service by drinking four double cognacs neat. Thereafter, on a wave of false elation, he returned to the drome, highly confident of his ability to fly as high as the stars.

Near his quarters he encountered Dorn.

"We're going to pull the same stunt tomorrow," Dorn informed him. "Up to fifteen thousand and over at that level. You'll be with us?"

"I'll be with you, Dorn," replied Sexton. "And if you think I've lost my nerve, you four-flusher, just step out behind that hangar and take off your coat."

Dorn laughed nastily. "Why should I bother?" he inquired. "You won't be around here long, anyway." He walked away, his laughter a derisive trail behind him.

Dorn knew. That was certain. He'd penetrated Sexton's secret, and he meant to use his knowledge—not straightforwardly, by reporting Sexton's condition to the major, but crookedly, as his mind worked, making out a case of loss of nerve. Cowardice, to call the thing by its plain and ugly name.

THE rest of that week was plain hell for Sexton.

Three times he went up with patrols led by Dorn; three times his treacherous lungs betrayed him, and he had to leave the formation. He was not called before the major again, though the adjutant told him that Dorn so reported his conduct as to make it appear that he left each time just as the enemy ships appeared.

The other pilots began to look at him queerly. Conversations were abruptly stopped and changed to a key of false heartiness when he approached. He could read the pity, and the contempt, in their

young eyes. They thought him a coward.

At last, one night when he was alone in his cabin, the adjutant came in, very solemn and ill at ease.

"Bob," said he, "I oughtn't to tell you. But—damn it all, I don't know what's wrong with you, but I know you're not yellow. That stuffed shirt of a Dorn has filed formal charges against you for cowardice in the face of the enemy. The major can't just lay 'em aside. He's got to act on 'em. I thought you ought to know."

Sexton was cold all over. He sat and stared at the adjutant for a long moment.

Then, "Thanks, Jim," he said briefly. The adjutant started to say something else, looked at Sexton's face, swore angrily and stamped out, slamming the door behind him.

Cowardice in the face of the enemy!

Sexton spent a sleepless night, tossing on his hard bunk. In the morning he reported for patrol as usual.

To his surprise, the major was in the mess-room when he went in for his coffee. "New job for you, gentlemen," the C. O. announced when all the pilots of B Flight were present. "G. H. Q. has been making a study of German ground-strafting methods. The 99th Division is putting on a small attack in the Bonneville sector this morning. This is the place." His finger stabbed at a wall-map.

Then he continued:

"The Germans will counter-attack, of course, as they always do. You gentlemen will deal with their counter-attacking infantry as they cross the open space between their reserve line, here, and their new switch line, which is incomplete at this point. Take an extra belt of ammunition. The armorer has some light fragmentation bombs ready, of which you will take six each. You will use the emergency field at Planchette, here, for a rendezvous. Fly back there after your attack. You may be required again in the afternoon if the division undertakes any further operations. There will be fresh orders for you at Planchette, also more ammunition and bombs. You understand just what you are to do, Dorn?"

"Yes, sir," said Dorn promptly. "I'm to take my entire flight?"

"Of course."

"I'd rather not take Sexton on a ticklish job like this," Dorn snapped out.

"I'm not asking you what you'd rather do," the major retorted. "Here's a time schedule and a map for each pilot. Carry on, make a good job of it. Good luck."

The major stamped out. The other pilots looked at Sexton with doubt and pity, at Dorn without much confidence.

It was a fine situation for a flight going on an untried, unknown sort of detail.

But Sexton was grinning for the first time in days. "No high flying today, eh, Dorn?" he suggested. "Now we'll see something."

THE Germans were apparently none too well pleased at the sudden appearance of ground-strafting planes above their position at a critical moment.

At any rate, as B Flight swooped in a long line to attack the masses of gray infantry creeping forward toward the switch trench, they were greeted with a perfect storm of fire. It came not only from the assailed infantry's machine guns, but from every battery of 77's and 105's within range. The air rocked with the detonations of exploding shells. Fragments of steel whizzed in all directions, piercing wings, ripping through fuselages.

Nevertheless, four of the planes of B Flight swept the infantry with their diving bursts of tracers, leveled off at the dizzy height of fifty feet, let go their light bombs and zoomed away.

As Sexton, last of the lot, turned loose his bombs and gave his Nieuport the gun, he looked up—and saw, as he had expected, another Nieuport high above him. It was flying in an erratic course, surrounded by shell-bursts, and from its wing tips fluttered the streamers of a flight leader.

Sexton laughed grimly. He couldn't stand altitude, but Dorn couldn't stand shell-fire.

He swung into the lead of the flight and led them down into another dive, using only tracers this time. The German infantry had scattered to what shelter was to be found in incomplete trenches, shell-holes, ditches. They were not used to being attacked from the air—and they didn't like it.

Sexton fired a red Very star—the agreed signal to "Make the best of your way to rendezvous." Nothing more to be done just now. He was happy—fiercely, exultantly happy. Here was work he could do without suffering the pangs of altitude.

He came down on the emergency field to find a truck waiting with a load of ammunition and bombs, and orders from the major to stand by for a second attempt that afternoon, at a slightly different location. The 99th Division's attack had been successful, and they were now going to try to extend their flank to the right, where another German counter-attack could be expected.

Sexton had scarcely finished digesting this news, when Dorn came gliding in

for a landing. Sexton walked over to the flight leader's plane as it rolled to a stop.

Dorn sat in the cockpit, gasping, eyes protruding as he swept his goggles back with a despairing gesture.

"Don't like shells any better than you used to, do you?" Sexton remarked. "Well, boy, you haven't seen anything yet. Just wait till you see what Fritz will serve up this afternoon. He'll be laying for us this time."

"This—this afternoon?" stammered Dorn.

"Sure. Look." Sexton handed over the new order.

Dorn stared at the sheet of flimsy with its curt instructions. "God!" he breathed, leaning against the side of the ship, eyes lifting themselves to Sexton's as though pleading for help.

"I can't do it," he added, slowly, each syllable a separate gasp.

"You've got to," Sexton retorted.

"No!" Inspiration seemed to come to Dorn suddenly. He gripped Sexton's sleeve with insistent fingers which would not be shaken off. "You led the flight this morning, Bob. Do it this afternoon, again. I know I've treated you like a skunk, Bob, but I was afraid—afraid of what you might say. I'll withdraw those charges—I swear I will. Just take my plane and let me take yours. Who'll know the difference, in the big rush of a take-off, with goggles on? Then I can keep out of it. Maybe the fellows didn't notice much this morning, but if it happens again, I'm done for. You'll help me, won't you, Bob?"

Sexton looked at the man before him and felt, despite everything, a stab of pity. It wasn't really Dorn's fault. He was a good pilot, and brave enough ordinarily. He simply couldn't stand shell-fire.

"Yes," Sexton said slowly. "I'll help you—on one condition. You'll withdraw those lying charges you filed against me."

"Yes, of course—and I'm sorry, Bob."

That afternoon, when the patrol took off, Dorn's plane stood close to Sexton's. The two pilots, both wearing helmet and goggles, went in between the roaring ships, and no one noticed that Dorn got into Sexton's plane, and that it was Sexton who led off the streamer-bearing Nieuport.

AT three thousand feet, as Sexton swooped down toward the target, he encountered heavy artillery fire, obviously from batteries specially detailed to attend to ground-strafters.

Counting on speed and a sudden change of direction to throw off the German gunners, Sexton was received by another

aerial barrage a thousand feet below. Machine guns came into action, and the advancing infantry, split up into small groups which doubled forward from cover to cover, offered no such target as had the massive columns of the morning.

But Sexton had anticipated all this. He had foreseen just about what the German tactics would be, and he had, through Dorn, issued certain instructions to his pilots. They assailed the small groups with machine-gun fire, scattering several. Then, instead of pulling quickly up and away, they flew low above the German positions, at a height where ordinary camouflage was of little use, and bombed such of the hidden German machine guns as they could locate.

Having disorganized this section of the German defenses, they zoomed away, formed a column, and came sweeping down again above the trench in which the greater part of the advancing infantry had taken refuge. With machine gun fire they raked the crowded trench-bays, doing terrific execution.

But they were not unscathed. Owens, flying behind Sexton, crashed to the ground with startling speed. His plane dissolved into a mass of wreckage.

Sexton, climbing at last with the patrol at his tail, discovered the loss of the cheery little pilot and resolved on one more dive to expend the last of his ammunition—and get a few more Huns to follow Owens to the Valhalla of brave airmen.

He looked around for Dorn, and found him, flying high, yet not so high that any of the other pilots, in the furor and excitement of ground-strafting, could have sworn there was an absentee.

Things would be all right yet, Sexton felt, as he led the flight downward for a last machine gunning of the German trench.

He was met with a vicious burst of fire, not only from the remaining German Maxims, but from automatic rifles in the trench itself. Nevertheless, he strafed them savagely. The following ships managed to get in their bursts of fire and pull away without loss.

But as Sexton zoomed, he saw wings above him, dark against the sky—wings which bore the black crosses of the enemy, Fokkers!

They were all around him, three or four of them attacking him at once. Tracers smashed viciously into Sexton's instrument board, spattering him with stinging splinters. He managed to fling his ship aside just in time to save himself, only to see another Fokker swooping upon him.

He was cold meat. He knew that mo-

ment of terrible anticipation which comes to the flyer attacked without hope of escape. And then, as he braced his body to take the smash of bullets, the attacking Fokker swerved and side-looped away.

Hot on its tail, guns blazing, roared a Nieuport.

SEXTON recognized his own ship, and knew that it was Dorn who had come to his rescue. Dorn—yes, Dorn was brave when it wasn't a question of shell-fire. And he could hardly afford to have Sexton shot down in the flight commander's ship while he had to report home in Sexton's bus.

That thought flashed through Sexton's mind even as, with a quick bank, he swung away from another Fokker and poured in a vicious burst at still another which was just coming out of a luckless dive at Dorn.

Below, a Fokker was falling, black smoke tinged with flame whipping out behind. Dorn had a victory of his own at last. The other Fokkers were drawing off. Far to the eastward, the khaki wings of reinforcing Nieuports were appearing in the bright sky; the remaining ships of B Flight were climbing into the scrap.

And at that moment Sexton's engine gave one expiring gasp and conked. Too many bullets in its interior had proved indigestible.

Machine guns and rifles were spitting at him from below. He tried to pierce with his eyes the smoky battle-veil, but he could not be sure who held the welter of trenches and wire which he saw through the drifting gaps. He was going down fast. He saw the brown shell-tortured earth just beneath him. There was no time to pick a place to land, nothing to do but just let her hit—and hope.

He landed on a fairly flat piece of ground, rolled perhaps ten feet; then he crashed into a shell-hole with a shock that bruised him from head to foot. His wings crumpled as his tail went up. Dazedly he struggled with his safety belt, won free, and climbed out of the wreckage of his plane.

As he wriggled over the edge of the hole, a shell burst just beyond him. The blast of it threw him back against the wrecked ship. He felt the bite of steel in his side, felt a leg give way beneath him.

The numbness that marks a bad wound seized upon his right leg from hip to ankle. He could feel the hot blood running down his side as he lay there, half-stunned, unable to move.

And he realized that he had come down in No-Man's-Land, for bullets were whis-

ting past in both directions. Another shell landed, not quite so close. The Boche were shelling the plane, bitterly determined to destroy it and its pilot.

As he peered up through the smoke, he caught sight of khaki wings and tri-colored cocardes. A Nieuport—one of his gang! Perhaps it meant rescue.

Then for the second time he recognized his own ship. It was Dorn. No hope there, for Dorn would never dare venture down into that hell of shell-fire.

Yet here he came—down, at a steep angle, straight for that bit of open ground!

He made an excellent landing and rolled to a stop perhaps fifty feet from where Sexton lay. Sexton tried to drag himself up. Agony twisted his body. He saw Dorn jump out of the ship, come running toward him, white-faced, jaw set, dark eyes blazing with determination.

Then the world rocked—and dissolved in a thunderous hell of flame and smoke.

SEXTON lay blinking up at the clean white ceiling of the hospital room, where the sunlight filtered through the leaves outside the window, made an ever-changing pattern of gold and shadow.

His leg throbbed dully in its plaster cast. For the rest, his body was a patchwork of bandages and dressings, and his head was swathed in a white turban. However, the doctor had said he'd be up and about in a month's time.

There was a stir at the door. Two orderlies came in, pushing and pulling at a rubber-tired cot-on-wheels.

On that cot, so bandaged of face as to be scarcely recognizable, lay Dorn. Sexton knew those eyes, though hardly any of the rest of the man's face was visible.

"Hello, Bob," said Dorn in feeble greeting, through a slit in the swathing strips.

"Hello, old-timer!" Sexton grinned.

All rancor against the man had departed from Sexton when they had told him how Dorn, his plane wrecked by shells, had carried Sexton into the American lines on his back, falling down three times as shells burst near him, terribly wounded, at last, but keeping on till he had brought Sexton to safety. His face, the doctor said, had been all but shot away. The girls would never flock around handsome Cheaty Dorn again.

Before anything more could be said, a heavy step sounded in the corridor, and Major Bassett strode into the room.

"So here you are!" said he, shaking both by the hand. "Well, well! Glad to see you both. Thank God you're pulling through. Now then, Dorn, you sent for me? What's it all about?"

"I wanted Sexton to hear, sir," Dorn answered. And then, in simple straightforward words—words which trembled a little, for very shame—Dorn made the full confession which is supposed to be good for the soul. The Gerhardt business, the high-flying torture, the false charges—everything, he told.

As he talked on, the major's face grew sterner and sterner. When he had finished, there was silence for a moment. Then the major spoke. "You'll face a court as soon as you're well enough, Dorn," he said. "I'll see justice done."

Sexton stretched out a hand toward his C.O. "Please, sir," he begged. "Why stir up a rotten mess? I'm not that hungry for glory. If Dorn is tried, it'll hurt the squadron, and it'll hurt the service. Let it go, sir."

"But, damn it all, man, Dorn has no right to the D.S.C. He's wearing *your* decoration."

"He earned it twice over the other day, sir, when he came down in that shell-fire to pick me up," was Sexton's instant answer.

"Hrrrrmp!" The major glanced from one young pilot to the other. "Well, have it your own way. I appreciate your feelings for the honor of the squadron, Sexton. We're damned sorry to lose you."

Sexton nodded. "I know, sir," he said. "Neither of us will ever fly again. Dorn's too badly cracked up, and my damaged lungs—" He choked. He could say no more.

"Who said you'd never fly again?" retorted the major. "I merely said I was sorry to lose you. They're organizing a new ground-strafting squadron for that duty alone. I've been asked to recommend a good officer to command it—rank of captain. Would you like the job, Sexton?"

Words failed Sexton, but his eyes were eloquent.

"Then get well," the major rumbled, getting to his feet. "I've got to be going along. Be back next week. See that I find you sitting up, you hear?"

As the door closed behind the major, Sexton turned his head slowly and looked at Dorn. Poor Dorn! No more flying for him. Not for months, anyway, would he leave that bed. While Sexton would be out there in the air, doing a man's work—an airman's work.

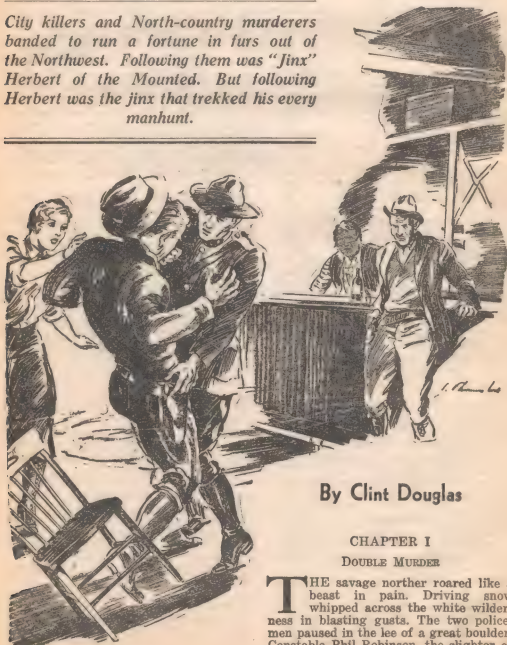
Yet somehow there was no sadness in Dorn's gaze. His face-bandages wrinkled, and Sexton fancied he was trying to smile.

"Thanks, Bob," said Dorn very softly. "Aw, that's all right," grunted Sexton. "Say, y' know that new nurse? She's a good kid. S'pose she'd get us a little shot of cognac?"

• Northwest Mounted

The Frozen Empire

City killers and North-country murderers banded to run a fortune in furs out of the Northwest. Following them was "Jinx" Herbert of the Mounted. But following Herbert was the jinx that trekked his every manhunt.



By Clint Douglas

CHAPTER I

DOUBLE MURDER

THE savage norther roared like a beast in pain. Driving snow whipped across the white wilderness in blasting gusts. The two policemen paused in the lee of a great boulder. Constable Phil Robinson, the slither of the two, led the way. The limping giant

who followed a dozen paces in the rear was Constable "Jinx" Herbert.

"Damn it all!" Herbert growled. "This leg—"

"Take it easy, old-timer," the other shouted into the storm. "We got lots of time. They can't get away."

Herbert spat with the wind. He growled, "Don't be simple, Phil. We're out o' luck an' you know it. No grub. No ammunition. And, since I stepped in that damned hole and twisted my leg, they got two hours' edge on us, easy."

"Don't you believe it," Robinson encouraged. "We're right on their tails. We—"

"Horse feathers!" Herbert snapped. "They've made monkeys out of us. It was ten days ago when they dropped down on us. Five of 'em. We don't even know who they are. In ten days they've stolen one hundred thousand dollars' worth of fur, three dog teams, an' they've killed three men."

"Right now they're over the border and in Alaska. Out of our territory for keeps. Won't the inspector take us for a ride though. And it's all my fault. Jinx Herbert, that's me. Always the jinx. Expect I hadn't ought to kick though. Last time—on that Cougar Notch assignment—I broke an arm; time before I fell through the ice and collected pneumonia. This time I only sprain a leg. Not bad. Damned if it don't look as though this jinx business was kind of petering out. Maybe next time—"

Herbert's mournful soliloquy was interrupted by the crashing report of a rifle. The sound, carried to them by the wind, might have traveled a hundred yards or a mile. There was no way of telling. There were more shots as the two young policemen with one accord headed away into the blizzard in the direction from which those shots had come.

SO DENSE was the curtain of driving snow slanting down into their faces that they almost ran into the big log cabin on the shore of the little creek before they saw it. The rear wall of the building was already a sheet of wind-blown flame.

It was Robinson who stumbled over the fur-bundled body of a man huddled in the snow thirty feet from the cabin. Rifle locked under an arm the officer dropped on a knee. With a mittened hand he pawed the wet snow out of the man's whiskered face. All one side of that face was smeared with warm blood. A bullet had struck just over a cheek bone, had mushroomed upward and pierced the brain. The man was Yance Fifield, a trapper, and he was dead.

A shout from Jinx Herbert made Robinson look up. Herbert was lifting the limp body of another man from just inside the doorway of the burning cabin. "It's Ab Clam!"

But Ab Clam also was beyond the need of medical attention. The old trapper's head lolled limply as they laid him on blankets behind a sheltering boulder.

Jinx Herbert's strong face was gray with frustrated rage. He swore steadily. "Two more," he rumbled. "And we were too late—"

The words suddenly choked back into Jinx Herbert's throat. He saw a flurry of sudden movement and a pair of twinkling legs disappearing behind the wall of hurrying snow.

"A girl!" the big policeman muttered incredulously. "Young, Phil, and a down-right beauty. No flat-faced nitchie. And she wasn't a breed. A white girl, Phil."

"How much do you suppose she saw?" Robinson mused. "Maybe she could identify—"

"That's just what we're going to find out," Herbert snapped. "No sense in tryin' to overtake the devils which finished old Ab and Yance Fifield; like I said before, they're probably in the United States of America right now. They ain't clean away, o' course; but what can we tell the United States marshal to look for? We don't know. Mebbe this girl can tell us."

With only a passing glance at the burning cabin, Herbert headed away at a limping run in the direction taken by the fleeing girl.

THE International Boundary Line between the United States and Canada follows a straight line from the Arctic Ocean southward almost to the Gulf of Alaska. Simple as this appears from a map-reader's standpoint, there are many spots along that seven-hundred-mile stretch which have never been trod by the foot of man. The boundary line is elastic at best.

At old Sam Dillard's Halfway House, however, the International Boundary Line was, by tacit consent of both the United States and Canada, accurately defined. For miles the line followed the straight, turbulent course of Madman's Run. Halfway House had been built at a bend in Madman's Run and carefully placed so that half of it was in the United States and half in Canada.

Dillard himself was a decent sort but it was well known that Halfway House harbored fugitives from the law hailing from both Canada and the United States. It was here they aimed when hard pressed; Dillard outfitted them, loaned

them money. He was still alive and his business prospering, which two facts made it clear to law officers from both countries that Sam Dillard, despite certain evident irregularities in conduct, was a square-shooter.

This particular day, old Sam was riding a hunch. His watery eyes twitched constantly toward the heavy log door.

When that big door finally swung inward, the old man stooped quickly and the bony fingers of his right hand closed about the stock of a sawed-off shotgun. It was a girl who materialized out of the cloud of powdery snow dust.

She pulled the lynx skin parka over her shoulders and shook her yellow head. Sam Dillard swallowed hard. His whiskered lips made unintelligible sounds. Even before Lou Dillard spoke he knew his hunch was about to be justified.

"The police are coming, Dad," the girl exploded as soon as she got her breath. "Two of them. Young fellows. Constables, I guess. Inspector Snell and Corporal Ben Briggs left Lacey River Post this morning. *They're* heading this way, too."

Lou Dillard paused breathlessly. Her brown eyes were fixed with a curious intentness on her father's face. Sam Dillard fidgeted uneasily. The girl hadn't told all of her story. He knew.

"Waal," he prompted. "Go on! We been visited by redcoats afore. That ain't nothin' to git excited about. Unless," he grinned, "one of them young constables is good lookin'."

Lou Dillard's wind-reddened cheeks could not have gotten much redder. She flashed a dubious smile. "One of the constables is very good looking," she said. "The other one is big and hairy and walks with a limp. I like the big one best."

"You would," Sam Dillard bantered. "The closer they resemble grizzly bears, the better you seem to like 'em. But what's the rest of your story, Lou?"

A frightened look came briefly into the girl's face. Her dark eyes had a faraway look, as though she were visualizing some impressive scene she had just witnessed. "There were five of them," she finally said softly, as though speaking to herself. "Strangers. Chechaquos, I guess. I never saw any of them before. They killed Ab Clam and Yance Fifeild. They had three dog teams. They took all of the furs from old Ab's cache and burned Yance Fifeild's cabin. The two constables got there—too late."

Sam Dillard was staring at the girl as though she were a ghost. His whiskered lips twitched. His eyes had a haunted look as though some long-buried misery out of the past had achieved sudden resurrec-

tion. "What—what did the leader of the gang look like, Lou?"

Lou Dillard answered thoughtfully. "He was a big man. Almost a giant. He had yellow hair and blue eyes. There was a scar—or no it was a birthmark—along his right cheek—"

The words stuttered on the girl's lips. She cried out and ran forward as Sam Dillard leaned, gasping, back against the bottle-filled shelves behind the bar. "Dad!" she cried. "What is it?"

"Nothin'. Nothin' at all, Lou," the old man said huskily. "Kind of vertigo, I guess." He smiled whitely. "Expect I shouldn't of et so much of that fudge you made."

But it wasn't vertigo that ailed Sam Dillard, Lou Dillard knew. Sam Dillard—was afraid!

CHAPTER II

OUT OF THE BLIZZARD

THE GIRL was making her way around the bar toward her father when the big log door swung inward. A giant of a man stood there peering through ice-curtained eyes into the dimly lit room. There was a vivid purple birthmark along his right cheek.

The big man's eyes finally rested upon Sam Dillard's gray-white face. "Hello, Sam," he greeted in a deep, rumbling voice. "All alone?"

Sam Dillard nodded. He motioned to the wide-eyed girl with a hand discreetly hidden under the bar. Obediently Lou Dillard backed away and squeezed out through a door which led to her own room. The big man glimpsed the girl just as she disappeared. "That her?" he asked.

Sam Dillard nodded miserably.

For a long minute the giant's eyes rested on Sam Dillard's twitching face. He laughed then deep in his throat, turned and called over a shoulder, "O. K., boys."

Four fur-bundled figures plastered with snow from head to foot trooped into the room. The big man removed his wet cap. "You'd better beat it, Sam," he suggested. "A couple o' redcoat dicks will be here soon. Make yourself scarce. I'll take charge."

Sam Dillard did not protest. His pale eyes had a wild look like a cornered animal's. He shrugged his bony shoulders. "All right, Harl," he said. Fingers trembling visibly, he removed his white apron and stumbled away.

JINX HERBERT ran with amazing speed for such a big man. His game leg was forgotten as he raced through

the white thicket in pursuit of Lou Dillard. "Some runner," he wheezed. "Regular darned gazelle, or somethin' like that."

Robinson said something but the wind whisked the sounds away. Jinx Herbert turned and headed into the storm. Three paces behind, Phil Robinson followed, his dark eyes fixed apprehensively on that gray wilderness with dimmed borders which hemmed them in on all sides.

It was snowing so hard that the wall of wind-driven fluff filled eyes, nose, ears and mouth so that they could scarcely breathe. The white trail less than a rod ahead was a blur of feathery white.

That wide trail which had been cut through the swamp led right up to the front door of Halfway House. Both policemen deciphered the scrawled sign at the same moment. They exchanged questioning glances. Both had heard much about Halfway House but neither had ever before visited this out-of-the-way spot.

Jinx Herbert put his shoulder to the heavy log door and pushed inside. Phil Robinson was on his heels as he stopped and blinked about the big smoke-filled room.

"Howdy!" Herbert greeted.

Jinx Herbert's ready grin vanished abruptly. Although there were several men in that room, none had answered his friendly greeting. The big yellow-haired man with the purple birthmark, who officiated behind the bar, inclined his shaggy head ever so slightly; his greenish eyes squinting between half-closed lids coldly catalogued every feature of the two snow-covered policemen.

Jinx Herbert scowled as he stripped off his wet outer garments. That scowl deepened as his eyes became accustomed to the dimness and he saw the four hard-faced men lounging before the fire. He turned to the big man behind the bar. "Where's the boss?" he asked.

Harl Pancoast's thick lips sneered. He tapped his barrel-chest with a forefinger.

"You, eh?" Herbert grunted. "Fair enough. Rustle us some grub. And step on it!"

Pancoast's sneer broadened. "Sorry," he said. "We ain't got no grub to spare."

Jinx Herbert's big body tensed as though he had been struck in the face. "What's that?" he snapped.

"You heard me, redcoat," Pancoast snarled. "No grub. No room. Nothin'. In other words, mug, you and your pretty friend ain't wanted here. That clear?"

Jinx Herbert spat deliberately on the floor between his outspread feet. When he finally spoke it was in a voice ominously calm. "I'm afraid you ain't been around

much, Blondy," he said. "My friend an' me is members of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police. We're here on business. We want somethin' to eat. And we want it damned quick! I ain't askin' you, understand? I'm tellin' you!"

Harl Pancoast moistened his thick lips. The birthmark stood out in livid relief against his white cheek. His green eyes gleamed. With difficulty he manufactured a twisted grin. "And what if I refuse?" he queried.

Jinx Herbert laughed. "Try it," he suggested. "Just try it."

Just for an instant Harl Pancoast's ugly eyes wavered. Perhaps he *had* gone just a bit too far? But his men were watching him. Too late now to back down. "You'd frame a Pinch, I suppose," he sneered.

Jinx Herbert shook his head. "Not so's you'd notice it, tough guy," he said. "I'd take my nice red coat off—like this. Then I'd give this little badge of mine to my friend—so. Then—"

In three long strides Jinx Herbert reached the bar. Harl Pancoast's right hand streaked toward the gun in his belt. But he did not move quickly enough. Herbert's long right arm shot out. His fingers caught Pancoast by the hair of the head. He jerked forward savagely, then down.

Harl Pancoast was a big man and a powerful one but he was like a child in Jinx Herbert's hands. His face crashed the top of the bar. A split-second later a slapping blow alongside the head spun him clear about. His big body crashed back against the bottle-filled shelves. With a snarling cry he turned, his gun half-drawn. He looked into the black muzzle of Jinx Herbert's service pistol.

Jinx Herbert's lips smiled, but his eyes were steely hard. "You asked for it, half-wit," he said. "Now you got it what you goin' to do with it?"

Pancoast's flat nose was already beginning to swell. He spat blood and a broken tooth. There was fear in his watering eyes. "Johnny!" he called.

One of the four men, a jaunty little cockney, jumped to his feet. The little man's faded blue eyes avoided Herbert's.

"Fix up something to eat for these mugs," Pancoast ordered. "An—an' make it snappy," he amended hastily.

Johnny Boston saluted with military precision and headed for the kitchen.

Jinx Herbert's smile was almost real as he held his left hand out palm upward over the bar. "Give me that gun of yours," he suggested. "Your eyes is be-ginnin' to swell. Soon, you won't be able to see so well. I'd hate like hell to have a

blind man takin' pot shots at me. Come, come, hand it over!"

Harl Pancoast reluctantly obliged.

Herbert slipped the weapon, a long-barreled Colt forty-five, into his belt. "What's your name?" he asked Pancoast.

The latter pawed at his bloody face. "Jones," he said.

"You're lyin'!" Herbert said easily. "But I kin think o' lots worse things to call you than Jones, bozo. Now then, before than pan o' yourn gets so sore you can't talk, answer me some questions. I'm lookin' for a girl—young, good lookin', a lightweight. She came here."

Harl Pancoast's eyes were fast swelling shut. He blinked rapidly and squinted toward the back of the cabin. "No girl here," he mumbled.

Herbert studied the big man's battered face. "You're a liar by the clock," he accused. "But I ain't goin' to play with you no more on a empty stomach. Afraid if I really got rough, you'd bust out cryin'. Think things over while I'm feedin' my face. I'll be talkin' to you again."

CHAPTER III

"COLD DUCK"

DURING his argument with "Jones" Jinx Herbert had noticed that the men by the fire, although they had watched the proceedings with alert interest, had remained as motionless as so many stuffed dummies. And as he turned to join Phil Robinson, he discovered the answer to this question.

Robinson, a cigarette smoldering between his lips, leaned far back in his chair facing the four men. His service pistol lay on the table and the young constable's right hand toyed suggestively with the butt of the gun.

Jinx Herbert grinned. Phil Robinson spoke out of a corner of his mouth: "Something cock-eyed here, Jinx," he said. "A bird named Sam Dillard runs this place. An old chap, Dillard. This 'Jones' doesn't belong here. He's a chechaquo. So are those four by the fire."

Jinx Herbert nodded his big head. He agreed: "They're all new but 'Jones.' 'Jones' has been around. His clothes are right, you'll notice. He knows the north country right enough, but he ain't been up here long—this time."

"Maybe you're right," Robinson agreed. "But things look damned queer to me, Jinx. They all belong together, that's a cinch. And there are five of them. That suggest anything to you?"

"You're damned tootin' it does," Herbert rumbled. "I got that first off. They

may be the gang we're lookin' for. But it won't do to go off half cocked. I—"

Herbert faced suddenly half about as a rear door swung inward and Johnny Boston appeared with a heavy tray balanced in professional manner on one hand. An appetizing aroma came from that tray. But, despite his hunger, Jinx Herbert devoted only a passing glance to Johnny Boston and that food-filled tray.

Boston expertly kicked the door shut behind him. But just before that door slammed, Jinx Herbert's quick eyes glimpsed a girl's frightened face. She had peered about an angle in the wall near the kitchen. A white hand flashed out in some sort of signal. Then the swinging door hid her from sight. Jinx Herbert came half out of his chair.

But Robinson caught his arm. "Hold your horses," he cautioned. Herbert dropped, scowling, back in the chair. Robinson apparently had seen the same thing his companion had seen.

With a smirking smile Johnny Boston emptied the heavy tray. The meal that was set before them was fit for a king—thick strips of bacon, crisp and brown, corn bread, rice, a pot of honey and black coffee. A square bottle was the last object the little cockney placed on the table. He got two glasses from the bar. "Anything else, gents?" he inquired solicitously.

And as both hungry men shook their heads the cockney tossed the empty tray on a table and, with a sneering grin wrinkling his pinched face, joined his companions by the fire.

"You saw her?" Herbert queried between mouthfuls.

PHIL ROBINSON nodded. "The back of this place is in the United States," he said. "If and when we start something we want to be damned sure the action takes place—in Canada. You know how Inspector Snell feels about that? If he ever learns that we were fooling around—in the United States—we'd both be kicked out of the service so quick—"

"Yeah, I know," Herbert interrupted impatiently. "But there's times when little things like International Boundary Lines don't mean much. I'm thinking this here is one of them times, Phil. Reach me that bottle. A couple o' slugs o' redeye will do good."

The two men drank moderately but appreciatively.

"Here's where we start, Phil," Herbert said low voiced. "I'm going over into the United States an' check up on that girl. You take a look outside. If these birds are our men, they should have three

heavily loaded dogs teams. Those dog teams ain't flown away."

Phil Robinson nodded. "Check," he said and came to his feet.

With his hand on the outside door Robinson turned. He beckoned his companion with his head. "I think 'Jones' has another gun under the bar," he said. "Watch him!"

As the door closed on Phil Robinson's heels, Jinx Herbert swung quickly about. Johnny Boston and one of the latter's companions were edging toward the black hallway that led to the kitchen. "Hold it!" Herbert snapped. "Where you two birds goin'?"

The men stopped in their tracks. Jinx Herbert started across the room toward them; his thumbs locked in his broad leather belt left his hands free to grasp the butts of the pistols there. The eyes of both men twitched furtively toward Harl Pancoast.

Jinx Herbert knew he was treading on mighty thin ice. He had nothing on these men. Nothing but suspicions. He couldn't afford to be too high-handed. But the man 'Jones' had lied about that girl.

Jinx Herbert forgot Phil Robinson's warning. Just for an instant his back was turned toward the bar. "You hold it, red-coat!" came a harsh voice.

Jinx Herbert pivoted on his heels. He looked into the twin muzzles of Sam Dillard's sawed-off shotgun held rigidly in "Jones'" two hands. The big man's swollen face grimaced a sneer. "I'm just saving you from nosing into trouble, Mr. Policeman," he said. "That partition is the boundary line between Canada and the United States. You're out of your bailiwick when you pass that door. Wouldn't do for you to get into trouble—in the United States. Inspector Snell might get rough with you."

Jinx Herbert's square jaws hardened. His blue eyes were ugly. The locked thumbs slid out of his belt. His two hands hovered above the butts of the guns. "Put down that gun!" he said hoarsely. "I'm givin' you just ten seconds, you flat-faced mug!"

Harl Pancoast spat blood; his little eyes, squinting out through puffed lids, twitched from side to side. "And what then?" he wanted to know.

"I'm going for my guns," Jinx Herbert said.

Pancoast spat again. "Don't be a damned fool," he growled. "I'll blow you to hell—"

A shuffling sound at his back caused Jinx Herbert to turn. A single flashing glance told him that two of the men by the fire had slipped out. Just as his

big body tensed for the showdown the muffled report of a gun sounded. There was a yell. Something crashed solidly against the outside wall of the cabin. Jinx Herbert's two hands streaked for his guns. There was a slapping step behind him. A swishing sound. He fired blindly. There was a cry. His second gun, half-drawn, exploded, sending a leaden slug into the floor as a down-swinging rifle barrel crashed on the top of his head.

Jinx Herbert's curly red hair was long and thick, his skull hard; but that terrible blow would have felled an ox. He went out like a light. The big man with the clubbed rifle, sure of the result of his handiwork, merely glanced down once at the unconscious man's pain-twisted face.

Pancoast again spat redly. "Did you croak him, Pug?" he asked calmly.

Pug Mincher nodded. "Cold duck," he said laconically.

CHAPTER IV

FRAMED

JINX HERBERT'S first sensation as he fought his way back to consciousness was of a stifling acrid odor. Even before he blinked his aching eyes open he identified that smell. Whisky. He was drenched with the stuff. It had even been rubbed into his stubby beard.

With eyes squinting against the throbbing hurt of his head he came up on an elbow. An involuntary groan pulsed out through his lips. He saw two pairs of legs. His bleary eyes traveled upward. He looked into the stern, hard-lined face of Inspector Snell. The older man at Snell's side, puffing on the proverbial brier pipe, was Corporal Ben Briggs.

Snell's snapping black eyes were hard as flint. His thin lips were drawn in a white line under his small military mustache. "A fine mess," he was saying. "Fine mess."

Jinx Herbert's befuddled thoughts groped for understanding. He couldn't even remember where he was until he made out the long bar. Then his dizzy eyes saw a limp arm encased in a familiar red coat hanging over the side of the big table. Phil Robinson! Swearing under his breath Herbert came dizzily to his feet. He stumbled toward that table brushing Snell arbitrarily aside. He looked down into the dead, white face of Phil Robinson!

Even in his confused state of mind Jinx Herbert knew that his comrade was dead. Nevertheless, he caught the limp figure by the shoulders. "Phil!" he cried hoarsely. "Phil, old-timer! Wake up!"

It was Ben Briggs who took Jinx

Herbert's arm and led him away. "It's no use, boy," the old officer said in a kindly voice. "He's dead."

"Dead," Jinx Herbert echoed. And then everything came back to him with a rush. He caught Briggs fiercely by a shoulder. "Where are they?" he cried. "Tell me!" he shouted as Briggs hesitated.

Inspector Snell thrust the half frantic man ungently backward. "You are talking to a corporal of police," he reminded coldly. "You—"

"Police, hell!" Jinx Herbert roared. "You're both *men*, ain't you? Phil Robinson was murdered. Does that mean anything to you? An' there were five men here. They're the ones who pulled those fur robberies, who killed—"

"Save your breath, Herbert," Snell interrupted brusquely. "You are no longer interested in—ah—that matter."

"What's that?" Jinx Herbert snapped.

"Because you are no longer connected with the Royal Northwest Mounted Police," the inspector went on evenly. "As soon as you are able to think clearly, you will, of course, manufacture a story to account for—everything. But as I said before, I am not interested. Corporal Briggs and I have investigated thoroughly. We find here every evidence that you and Robinson engaged in a drinking bout."

"I don't know who your companions were. I don't care, and it doesn't matter anyhow. You became quarrelsome. There was a fight. Robinson was—unfortunately—killed and you were knocked out. I say again that no case involving the activities of the police need interest you in the future. Your coat, if you please, Herbert. And your badge."

For the space of perhaps a dozen ticks of a watch Jinx Herbert looked Inspector Snell squarely in the eyes. He breathed noisily. His big fists clenched and unclenched. It was Snell who first lowered his eyes. "Come, come," he said impatiently.

With a sudden motion Jinx Herbert ripped off his coat. He tossed it on the floor at Snell's feet. Dropped his badge.

"And your gun," Snell reminded.

"Nothin' doin'," Herbert snapped angrily. "That gun is mine, bought and paid for. I'm keepin' it."

"Very well," Snell agreed. "I shan't take it away from you—"

"Damned right you won't," Jinx Herbert growled. He hunched his broad shoulders arbitrarily, spat through his teeth, turned away.

"I'm reminding you again, Herbert," Snell said, "that you are to keep out of this matter—"

Jinx Herbert swung around, his heavy

face livid. "You go to hell!" he said quietly. "You're no longer my boss. And I'm tellin' you to keep your trap shut. For a plugged nickel I'd plaster you one, just for luck."

INSPECTOR SNELL'S thin lips twitched in what might have been a smile. His black eyes sought Briggs' face but the old Corporal was fidgeting uneasily on his booted feet.

"This man, Phil Robinson, outside of his being a police officer was my friend," Jinx Herbert said, as he stood, his hand on the latch of the big front door. "Regardless of what you think you know, he was murdered. I know who done it and I'm goin' after 'em. I—"

"You say you know who did it," the inspector interrupted.

"Yes," Herbert snapped.

"May I ask who?"

"I don't know their names," Herbert answered. "Never saw any of 'em before. But that don't make no difference. I'll know 'em when I see 'em again and believe you me, brother, I'll be seein' 'em!"

Inspector Snell shrugged. "I have reason to believe, Herbert, that the men you seek are no longer in Canadian territory," he said. "If you live up to your—er—boast, you are apt to get in trouble with the law which is as you know upheld very efficiently by the United States. We shall not be concerned—about that. But—if your vengeance trail should lead you back into Canada—watch out. We certainly shall not countenance—"

But Jinx Herbert was gone. The heavy log door crashed shut, shaking the entire building.

Jinx Herbert's thoughts were still one vast confusion; every pounding beat of his heart was echoed by a throbbing hurt in his head. He clamped his teeth so tightly together that his jaws ached. Cold sweat beaded his forehead.

He found sled tracks in the drifted snow almost at once. His vision was still blurred and he could not see clearly. He had followed the trail for the better part of a mile before he realized that the snowshoe tracks in the snow before him pointed in the wrong direction and there was but one sled.

More careful inspection of the clear trail he had been following told him that those tracks had been made by Inspector Snell and Ben Briggs. Cursing himself for a blundering fool he started back the way he had come.

The blizzard had diminished in volume and intensity. It was getting colder and the snow had turned to ice. He was within a quarter of a mile of Halfway House when Snell and Briggs came out. Briggs

roused the sleeping dogs, harnessed them, and as Herbert continued to watch, the two policemen started away.

On that sled Jinx Herbert knew was Phil Robinson's dead body. He watched until the dog team was a tiny gray blur on the white horizon. Then, brushing the back of a hand wearily across his eyes, he circled slowly about the big log cabin which was Halfway House.

Almost immediately he found tracks left by three heavily loaded sleds. There had been four men with those sleds. What had happened to number five? Perhaps Phil had taken one of them with him?

The trail of the fugitives pointed due east into United States territory. Jinx Herbert hesitated. Twice his slow eyes turned back toward the big cabin. Although the trail of the men who had killed Phil Robinson was plain in the snow, that cabin seemed to draw him. He started toward the building, stopped and turned back. But he didn't go far. At the edge of the thicket he swung right about and shouldered in through the rear door of Halfway House.

CHAPTER V

VENGEANCE TRAIL

HE STOOD in the kitchen. Subconsciously he noted that the pinewood floors were clean. Pots and pans hanging on hooks driven into the log walls shone like mirrors. His roving eyes stopped at a red and white checked gingham apron draped over the back of a chair. He picked the garment up and held it clumsily in both hands. It was very small. And it had been worn recently. It was still wet in spots. The girl. A muffled sound broke in upon his thoughts. A man's voice. A sort of groan.

Hand on gun butt, Jinx Herbert passed into a hall. A door was open. He went in and circled the room with quick, suspicious eyes. The door to the clothes closet bulged outward ever so slightly. Walking on the balls of his feet, gun ready in hand, the big man crossed the room. He reached out, yanked the clothes press door open. The body of a man rolled out and sprawled limply at his feet!

Jinx Herbert looked down into the gray-white face of old Sam Dillard! Front of the old man's faded flannel shirt was soaked with blood. A bullet had gone clear through his body just over the heart. But he was still alive. Even as Jinx Herbert dropped on a knee, the old man's eyes fluttered open. The breath came in whistling gasps through the dying man's white lips.

"They've got—her," he gasped.



Jinx Herbert nodded. "Yeah, I know," he said. "Hold tight, old-timer. I'll get you a drink—"

But Sam Dillard shook his head weakly from side to side. "No time," he said. "I'm—almost—done. Come close, son. Listen."

Jinx Herbert dropped until his ear was within three inches of Sam Dillard's whiskered lips. "The blond fellow," the old man mumbled. "Harl Pancoast, his name is—he took Lou. It's—all right. He is—her father. He'll be—as good to her—as he knows how"

"But—it ain't right—son. He's a crook. A killer. All his gang are killers. Get this now: There's Tick Ellsworth—Boot McQuillan—Johnny Boston—Pug Mincher. You want 'em all. They've got a fortune in furs—on three sleds. They're heading for—Dawson. Get 'em, boy—and be good—to Lou—"

Sam Dillard's chin dropped on his breast. His head rolled limply sidewise. He was dead.

Jinx Herbert gave Sam Dillard temporary burial, hoisting the body high up in the limbs of a big spruce tree where the wolves and carcajous could not get at it. It was early evening by his watch when he started out.

At the end of the first two miles, Jinx Herbert spotted the three sleds snailing laboriously along the top of an open slope far ahead. He could not identify those moving objects as sleds and men. He didn't need to. They simply couldn't be anything else. Wolves or caribou would not travel single file as those distant objects were doing.

Lou Dillard, trudging disconsolately behind the second of the three sleds, was the first to spy Jinx Herbert's hulking shape on the hillside far below. The girl's heart jumped. She did not recognize that blurred figure but instinct told her it was the big red-headed policeman who had ridden roughshod over Harl Pancoast and the latter's entire gang.

It was Tick Ellsworth who finally saw Jinx Herbert. The lean-bodied Yankee gunman called excitedly to Pancoast.

"Briggs," Pancoast decided as he, too, espied that slowly moving figure. "Corporal Ben Briggs. He's hard, that feller. We've got to stop him."

Pancoast's motley crew gathered about him. Lou Dillard, a mittened hand touching the hidden gun, crouched on a sled and watched. A shudder crept up and down her back as her eyes traveled from face to face.

In her short lifetime she had seen many hard-bitten specimens of humanity. Men from all walks of life had at one time or another cleared through Halfway

House. A great many of these transients had been criminals; but Lou Dillard had never seen such palpably evil men as these companions of her father.

Only snatches of conversation reached Lou Dillard's ears, but she heard enough to know that Tick Ellsworth and Johnny Boston had been assigned to deal with Jinx Herbert.

The party made camp at the edge of a dwarfed cedar thicket half a mile farther on. Johnny Boston and Tick Ellsworth ate hastily and departed on their murderous errand. While Pancoast supervised the erection of three sturdy silk tents, Lou Dillard slipped away into the dark thicket.

CHAPTER VI

FIGHT ON THE BARRENS

THE GIRL'S absence was not noticed for several minutes. She was half a mile away and running like a deer down the uneven slope when Harl Pancoast's bellowing voice shouted her name. She dropped flat upon her face behind a razor-backed drift.

For several minutes she lay there scarcely daring to breathe. When she finally peered out and looked back the way she had come she saw Pug Mincher leave the camp and start away. The big man was attempting to pick up her trail. In this he failed, for Pug Mincher was no outdoor man.

Lou Dillard waited until Mincher passed out of sight, then she came to her feet and struck out swiftly, hugging the black-shadowed edge of a stunted cedar thicket. Always she headed south toward the spot where she had last seen Jinx Herbert.

Lou Dillard was absolutely at home on snowshoes. This was more than could be said of Ellsworth, Johnny Boston or Mincher. Holding close to the black-edged thicket she passed all three men without any of them seeing her.

Even so, however, Ellsworth and the cockney were not far behind when she circled the big snow-covered boulder, and threw herself panting beside Jinx Herbert's little camp fire.

Just for an instant a chill of fear settled about her heart when her eyes rested upon the pack and the empty blankets. Where had the policeman gone?

She called tentatively. A fur-bundled shape slipped behind an icy drift fifty yards away. Her first thought was that that man was Herbert. She started to her feet; prepared to call from between cupped palms.

Something crashed against the snow-

covered boulder at her side. There was a roaring report. A jut of flame.

Lou Dillard dropped flat upon her face behind Jinx Herbert's heavy pack. With trembling fingers she drew the little automatic pistol, crouched there waiting, wide-eyed, alert.

Sound of that shot awakened Jinx Herbert. But for the first thirty seconds he did not move so much as a finger. The big rock on which he lay was a natural sounding board. He could hear shuffling footsteps moving cautiously across the snow. Men's voices. They had attacked his dummy camp.

He grinned, slipped the pistol out of his belt into his left hand and loosened the rifle in the sling on his back. Then, like a great turtle peering out of its shell, he raised his head and squinted out across the gray-white barrens. He saw two crouching figures. Both men were armed with rifles. Both were watching that little camp directly below.

A suspicion of movement beside the fire at the base of the big rock caught his eye. His pistol jerked up, then dropped slowly. He swore. Lou Dillard.

Jinx Herbert came suddenly half upright. Even as his heavy service pistol roared at the two men, Pug Mincher rounded a little hillock one hundred yards in the rear.

But Jinx Herbert did not see Pug Mincher. In response to that roaring report Tick Ellsworth's long body jerked up as though yanked upright by a pair of unseen hands. He cried out hoarsely, clutched at his throat, sprawled flat upon his face.

Jinx Herbert's gun twitched aside at Johnny Boston; but the cockney had seen that stabbing flash. He rolled over and over and came up on a knee behind a rock twenty feet away. Three bullets from Jinx Herbert's gun followed the little man's tumbling body. But none scored a hit.

LOU DILLARD came to her feet and scurried about the base of the big boulder. She saw Pug Mincher coming toward her. With a little cry of dismay she turned at right angles and ran as she had never run before. Pug Mincher hesitated briefly, then followed the fleeing girl.

Jinx Herbert heard Lou Dillard's cry of dismay. Just for a second his eyes twitched aside from the spot where Johnny Boston's snow-covered figure lay. The little cockney sighted quickly and fired. The bullet struck Jinx Herbert's gun hand, caromed off the butt of the weapon, and, its force half spent, crashed into his left shoulder.

The big policeman spun half about. His pistol flew from his numbed fingers. His big hands pawed the air; then he fell headlong over the edge of the little precipice.

Jinx Herbert landed on his back in a three-foot drift near the smouldering fire thirty feet below. Half dazed he sprawled flat upon the white ground.

But Jinx Herbert was not out. The fall had shaken him badly but his head was clear when Johnny Boston, rifle tightly gripped in both hands, approached the little camp two minutes later. Herbert could feel the warm blood trickling down his face from the reopened wound on his head.

The little cockney approached to within three feet of the prostrate man. Jinx Herbert could feel the gunman's eyes upon him. He did not move a muscle. The toe of a boot slipped his head over.

Through half-shut eyes the policeman saw the rifle in Johnny Boston's hand turned downward. Johnny Boston was not going to take any chances. The big redcoat *looked* dead. He had come to life once before. There was one sure way of making certain this did not happen a second time.

The little cockney's index finger was tightening on the trigger when Jinx Herbert went into action. So swiftly that even Johnny Boston's quick eyes never knew how it happened, Herbert's long right arm swept out. That rigid arm knocked the little cockney's feet neatly from under him. His rifle exploded harmlessly in the air.

Johnny Boston was on his feet like a cat. A slapping blow caught him alongside the head. He crashed headlong into the rock. The rifle was snatched from his hands. Crouching on a knee, gasping for breath, he saw that heavy gun descend. He willed to jump aside; but his body failed to respond. The gun barrel landed with a sickening crunching sound atop his head. With a single whimpering sigh Johnny Boston crumpled upon the snow—dead.

Dead also was Tick Ellsworth. Leaving the two men where they had fallen, Jinx Herbert shouldered his pack. He could see Lou Dillard and Pug Mincher quarter of a mile away racing across the open toward the cedar thicket. The girl was gaining ground momentarily, but Mincher, rifle half-lifted, was threatening her.

But Pug Mincher did not shoot. Herbert had not expected him to. But just as she was about to enter the black-shadowed thicket Lou Dillard fell. Jinx Herbert cried out hoarsely, caught the rifle from his back. Leaning against the top

of an icy drift he steadied the gun. Pug Mincher's broad back was an indistinct target at best. But there were five bullets in that gun and Jinx Herbert was a skilled marksman.

Suddenly Jinx Herbert began to swear. His gun was broken! In his fall from the top of that big boulder it had snapped off short at the stock.

Helplessly raging he saw Pug Mincher rush forward toward the spot where Lou Dillard had fallen. The girl struggled; but her movements were not purposeful. The fall apparently had dazed her. She stopped struggling finally. Just once she looked back over the way she had come. Then, slim shoulders slumping, she accompanied Pug Mincher as the latter headed northward along the thicket edge.

CHAPTER VII

TO THE DEATH

IT WAS late that night when Jinx Herbert entered the fringe of black-shadowed thicket near Pancoast's camp. It was breathlessly still. Tiny frost particles filled the air with a dim silver radiance.

The policeman staggered when he walked. Wordless mumbling sounds squeezed out through his tight lips. His head felt like a red hot bundle of nerves on which a trip hammer beat a constant tattoo. His pursuit of Pug Mincher and Lou Dillard had been blundering and uncertain. He had lost their trail in the hard snow a dozen times. But he had always picked it up and had pushed on with dogged persistence. There were three of them left—and Lou Dillard.

Even though he had scarcely been aware of what he was doing, Jinx Herbert had gone back to his little camp and possessed himself of Tick Ellsworth's 45-70 Winchester rifle. He held the heavy gun ready for instant use under an arm as the bandits' camp appeared in the little clearing beyond the thicket.

He made out the three tents and the smouldering fire. One of the tents he noticed had been pitched some distance from the other two. The flap of this tent was open and a little fire had been built close to that opening. The sleds and camp duffel were piled about the other two tents.

Jinx Herbert immediately guessed that Lou Dillard was the occupant of that third tent. He crouched behind a fallen log, and breathing hard, minutely inspected the camp. There were many dogs moving restlessly about searching for scraps of food near the fire. Others would

be buried in the snow sleeping—and there would be a guard of course.

Jinx Herbert crouched absolutely motionless, only his hard eyes moving, for several minutes. Three times his gun came slowly to shoulder; three times he lowered the weapon. Every instinct urged him to send a hail of lead into those two tents. Even though he failed to score a hit the occupants of the tents would be forced out into the open. He could then pick them off. But first he had to be very, very sure about Lou Dillard. And there was no way he *could* be sure, without—

His big body stiffened suddenly. The odor of tobacco smoke had come to him with a puff of icy wind. He groped to his feet; circled stealthily about through the black shadows. The man with the pipe would be the guard. Chances were the fellow was resting on one of the sleds.

This game of stealth was not Jinx Herbert's game. His pugnacious nature did not know caution. The longing to come to grips with his enemies urged him out into the open. For a long minute he stood on the thicket edge searching through squinting eyes for sight of the man with the pipe.

A scrunching step sounded behind him. He turned like a flash bringing his rifle, outstretched at the end of his long right arm, about in a swishing arc.

THAT involuntary protective measure saved Jinx Herbert's life. He glimpsed a fur-clad figure. Saw the rifle in the man's hand; the pipe tightly clenched in the man's mouth. Then, a slight downward tug and the barrel of his swinging rifle crashed a side of the smoker's head. Boot McQuillan dropped like a rotten log.

Just before Jinx Herbert's gun hit him, McQuillan had cried out hoarsely. The policeman swung arbitrarily about, rifle at shoulder. A dog yelped. From the near-by hills came the yowl of a wolf.

Jinx Herbert's eyes twitched from one to the other of the three tents. Suddenly, a white face appeared in the black opening of the third tent. Lou Dillard! Jinx Herbert swung his gun silently to attract her attention. The girl's white face instantly disappeared.

Jinx Herbert had no way of knowing whether or not she had seen him. He started tentatively forward, rifle gripped in his one good hand. His groping foot struck something soft and yielding. A dog jumped yelping out of the snow. A man cursed.

Then a voice:

"Jinx Herbert!" It was the girl.

Jinx Herbert stopped. Out of the corner of an eye he saw Lou Dillard creep

out of her tent; but he dared not look directly at her. Somebody was moving about in the nearest tent.

Abruptly, a light flared. This light grew quickly brighter. "Back!" came Lou Dillard's voice. "Get back!"

Jinx Herbert didn't understand. Briefly he faced the girl's tent. That tent was in flames! She had set it with a brand from her fire! She was already backing toward the thicket. Tightly gripped in her right hand was the little pistol.

And then in a breath Jinx Herbert understood. Pancoast and Mincher would rush out when they saw the fire. He started backing away. But his movements were clumsy. His eyes played tricks on him.

He heard a rumbling voice, a snarled oath. A rifle roared. His limp left arm flopped strangely and he was thrown off balance. He fired blindly at the flash even as he dropped on a knee. He saw the man with the gun now. Clumsily he worked the mechanism of his rifle. Fired again.

Pug Mincher fired at almost the same instant. But the shot went wild. Just as he tugged at the trigger of his gun, Jinx Herbert's bullet struck him. The heavy slug entered his right side just under the arm and went clear through his body, piercing his heart.

As the fur bandit fell another bullet hit him. But he never knew it. Pug Mincher was dead before he struck the ground.

The startled dogs were making a bedlam of sound. Half a dozen of them circled about the watchful policeman. He struck at them with his gun, scrambled to his feet.

Lou Dillard had disappeared. One of Mincher's bullets had been aimed at the girl. Was she hit?

Jinx Herbert half turned, started toward the thicket where she had disappeared. He saw her then, standing, little pistol in hand at the edge of the thicket in a strip of black shadow. As he started toward her she cried out. The squalling of the dogs drowned her voice. But there had been a warning note in that shrill call. Jinx Herbert stopped.

A gun roared. The bullet passed so close to his whiskered cheek that he could feel its hot breath. He glimpsed the half-dressed figure of a man. There was no time to bring his rifle into play. He swung the heavy weapon over his head and hurled it with all his might at Harl Pancoast.

The hurtling gun struck the blond giant across the chest. His rifle exploded drilling the white ground at his feet. He stumbled backward fighting for balance.

He saw Jinx Herbert come charging toward him head down like an angry bull. He struck out savagely. His clubbed fist hit the policeman alongside the jaw. That smashing blow did not even rock that red head.

Within the next instant one hundred and ninety pounds of fighting madman bore Harl Pancoast to the ground. The bandit fought desperately. He did not know about that injured left arm. It would have done him little good if he had known. Jinx Herbert's right fist lifted and fell. Lifted again and drove against the prostrate giant's jaw.

Harl Pancoast was no longer young; but he was a powerful man, skilled in rough and tumble fighting. Summoning all of his strength he twisted sidewise. But Jinx Herbert refused to be thrown. His clamping legs did loosen about Pancoast's body, however. Pancoast came up on an elbow shielding his jaw with his free arm.

Herbert's knee bored into the pit of the big man's stomach. That guarding arm dropped just for an instant. But that was quite long enough for Jinx Herbert's purposes. His fist crashed a side of Pancoast's head with a crack like a pistol shot. The giant's body twitched, then lay still.

TEN DAYS later three heavily loaded dog teams crept slowly down the frozen surface of Red River toward the Lacey River Post of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police.

Inspector Snell stood in the doorway drawing slowly on a fragrant cigar. He had been watching the approach of those three teams with his binoculars for some time. He had smiled when he recognized Jinx Herbert. He was still smiling when the weary dog teams came to a stop before the barracks.

A single glance told the alert police officer that those three sleds were indeed heavily laden. There was a fortune in furs evenly distributed on the three sleds. In addition to the furs, there were, on the first sled, three dead men—Pug Mincher, Johnny Boston and Tick Ellsworth. On the second sled rode two badly battered prisoners—Boot McQuillan and Harl Pancoast. On the third sled, warmly wrapped in many blankets, was a rosy-cheeked girl—Lou Dillard.

Jinx Herbert, his left arm in a sling, approached the barracks, scowling. The big man looked as though he had been run through a rock crusher; but Inspector Snell's keen eyes detected a certain jaunty confidence in Jinx Herbert's bearing which at first amused, then pleased him. There was a new gleam in the ex-

policeman's steely blue eyes; the promise of a ready smile on his lips.

Jinx Herbert's good hand automatically started upward in a salute. He dropped that hand with a sheepish look. "I got a couple o' prisoners here, Mr. Snell," he said gruffly. "Do you want 'em or shall I drop 'em through a hole in the ice?"

Inspector Snell's black eyes twinkled. "Really, you wouldn't do that—ah—constable," he said quietly. "You—"

"Constable?" Jinx Herbert snapped. "Where do you get that stuff?"

Inspector Snell's thin-lipped smile broadened. "Just as you say—ah—Herbert," he said. "Or perhaps corporal would sound better?"

Jinx Herbert swallowed hard. Lou Dillard came to his side and slipped her arm through his arm. Jinx Herbert patted the girl's mittened hand roughly. "I don't get you—inspector," he said hoarsely.

"I see you don't," Snell said. "The explanation is this, Herbert: Perhaps I was a bit harsh with you at Halfway House. But that is my reputation you know and I—ah—really had to live up to it." He chuckled. "But that wasn't my real reason for—discharging you from the service. You see, Herbert, I knew Pancoast's gang had framed you. Of course they *thought* they killed both you and Robinson. It was only your extremely good fortune—and your hard head—which saved you.

"Now then, I also knew that Pancoast and his gang with a record of six killings behind them and carrying a fortune in stolen furs, were on their way into United States territory. There was nothing we could do about that—officially. Of course, we could get in touch with the nearest marshal in Dawson but that would take time and meanwhile Pancoast could make good his escape. I couldn't—officially—order you to go on into the United States in pursuit of the killers.

"But I could put you out of the service,

which I did. I knew you would follow those men to the ends of the earth, if necessary. International boundary lines would mean nothing to *you*. And you accomplished—corporal—exactly what I hoped you would accomplish."

The slim fingers of Lou Dillard's hand had been tightening on Jinx Herbert's arm. When she looked up at him her eyes were bright. "Corporal," she whispered. "Did you hear him, Tom?"

Jinx Herbert nodded. His slow thoughts were just beginning to understand. "Meanin' you and Briggs framed all that?" he queried.

Inspector Snell nodded. "Yes," he admitted. "Your discharge papers never went through, Herbert. Ben Briggs is being transferred to Baker Inlet. I need a corporal to take charge here. The job is yours—if you want it."

Jinx Herbert looked down into Lou Dillard's glistening eyes. Then he looked up at Inspector Snell. Slowly, his wide mouth broke into a smile. "O.K., inspector," he said. "I accept."

The two men were shaking hands when Corporal Ben Briggs appeared about a corner of the building. The old policeman's whiskered face mirrored glad surprise. "Hello, Jinx!" he shouted. "Why, darn my eyes—"

Ben Briggs started forward, hand outstretched. Jinx Herbert met him scowling. He struck the extended hand aside; but there were little wrinkles of laughter at the corners of his eyes. "Lay off that 'jinx' stuff," he barked. "The next guy that calls me 'Jinx' gets a sock on the jaw. That goes for you, too, inspector. I'd almost forgotten it, but my name is Tom. Tom Herbert. My jinx is dead. And buried. And here's the young lady, gents, who done the killin', *an'* the buryin'. Miss Lou Dillard. Leastwise that *was* her name. We were married yesterday by the Methodist domine up on Turtle Creek. Now she's Mrs. Tom Herbert—Lou, to her friends."



Fortress of Fear

By Ronald Flagg



Treachery stalked the streets of Serrano, dread crept along its alleyways. And the one man who dared probe the secret of the fortress dungeon—was forbidden to reveal it.

THE great transport dipped its nose and glided gently downward toward the calm, sparkling waters of the harbor of Puerto Serrano. Even at that height, the twin white towers of the Fortress of San Silvestre dominated the harbor. The sun shone on them brightly, as it shone on the waters which lapped their foundations; but for all that, Frayne shuddered as he looked down upon them.

He had been in Puerto Serrano before, and he had seen the wretched victims of a dead tyrant brought out from their

chains and their sunless, water-seeping dungeons—broken, hopeless wrecks of humanity.

He tore his eyes away from San Silvestre and looked at the grim, gray cruiser, flying the Stars and Stripes, which lay at anchor near the harbor entrance. Beside her, a high-sided transport swarmed with the khaki of massed marines. A rear admiral's two-starred flag fluttered from the cruiser's masthead.

The stage was set for another Central American "incident," with its dénouement in a complacent radiogram:

The marines have landed and have the situation well in hand.

Frayne swore softly beneath his breath. He was thinking of the orders given him by his grave-faced chief in Washington, who spoke with such quiet authority across his broad desk.

"Go down and stop the trouble, Frayne. You know the country. You know the president. There's something wrong. President Aranaga hasn't suddenly gone mad after all these years. Get to the bottom of those queer stories about him. You'll have full authority to act as you think best, but don't use that authority unless you have to. Above all, I want no landings, no bloodshed. We're building up a policy of friendly cooperation with the Latin-American countries, and we don't propose to have that thrown away because of this tempest in a teapot. On the other hand—well, we can't permit American property to be sequestered. It's a delicate situation, Frayne. Do the job your own way, but do it. . . ."

Lieutenant-Commander Philip Frayne, U. S. N., unhooked his safety-belt and stood up as the plane taxied to a long low wharf. In white service uniform, he was ostensibly the bearer of dispatches to the American Minister, dispatches which he carried in a leather case tucked under his arm.

Actually, he was the most trusted agent of the Naval Intelligence Service, with a record as yet unmarred by failure. As yet, he reflected a trifle bitterly — but when they set a man to do the impossible. . . .

He ducked his head as he swung out of the cabin to the landing-float. There, in the bright sunshine, a young officer of the cruiser *Hartford*, stood waiting for him.

"Hello, Bobby! All set?"

"All set," Bob Cotton said, eagerly. "I had your radio yesterday, and I got in touch with your man by night. He has rounded up four or five of your former friends—"

"Easy, lad — easy." Frayne interrupted. He nodded toward the crowd of

gaping bystanders who were held in check by several of the cruiser's seamen and a couple of little brown police.

Frayne took leave of the Marine Corps pilot who had flown him down. Then with his friend, Lieutenant Cotton, he pushed through the crowd, heading for the American Legation.

"Big show on at the Legation this afternoon—reception for Morales," Cotton informed him.

Frayne shot the other a quick look. "For Morales?" He frowned, silencing the impulsive Cotton once more.

"What about a tall, cool one, old man?" Cotton asked, as they came to the open door of a little *cantina* familiar to both of them.

"Good idea," Frayne agreed.

They entered the dark coolness of the barroom, and as they ordered their drinks, several loungers stared at them curiously. A thin man in slouchy white duck who had followed them from the landing-place glanced in at the door and passed on.

Another man, wearing the rough dress of a stevedore, sidled along the bar till he stood by Frayne's side. He ordered a beer in a hoarse voice. Then, as the bartender turned away, the stevedore spoke from the corner of his mouth. "Tonight at seven, *señor*. Calle San Martin. The old house."

"*Bueno*," murmured Frayne without moving his lips.

The man took his beer and went to a back table. Frayne and Cotton finished their drinks and strolled out again into the narrow street.

"That's that," said Frayne. "Let's go on to the Legation."

HE noted few outward changes in Puerto Serrano since he had last been there, five years before. The same bare-footed peons walked stolidly along with their donkey-loads of produce; the same ramshackle taxis clattered madly over the cobbled pavements; and the same little knots of loungers stood on the corners of the Plaza, in the shade of the trees before the great cathedral. Even the same urchins besought him to buy "*Dulces—dulces*" from fly-covered baskets.

And yet, it was not quite the same under the surface. Men eyed each other with furtive suspicion. There was little of the carefree laughter of former days. Puerto Serrano seemed to be waiting for something.

In the courtyard of the Legation were half a dozen big cars. One bore the presidential arms on its panels.

"Is Don Carlos here?" Frayne asked of the doorman.

"No, señor. Alas, the good Don Carlos is still at his *hacienda* in the country. They say his health is not improved as yet. Señor Morales came in his car."

Frayne nodded, concealing his wonder. Cotton took him up to a room on the second floor, where he freshened his appearance. An *attaché* took away the dispatches. A few moments later, Frayne and Cotton descended to the great reception hall. There, in the center of the room, with the American Minister at his side, apparently hanging on his every word, General Francisco Fernando Morales, vice president of Serrano and commander-in-chief of the army, stood discoursing on the state of the nation.

The big room was full of Serranist officers in gaudy uniforms, local civilians in starched linen suits, and dusky-eyed ladies, red-lipped, dark-haired. There was also a scattering of Americans—worried-looking civilians, bronzed young marine officers in their well-scrubbed khaki, and a few naval officers in white.

Crowded though the room was, the murmur of conversation was surprisingly soft. Nobody wanted to miss what Morales was saying. He dominated the room. He was accustomed to dominate any spot he graced with his distinguished presence.

He was not a large man. His blue uniform—adorned with liberal gold lace and huge epaulettes allowed a Serranist general—fitted him beautifully. His boots were polished like mirrors, and the set of his sword-belt was perfect. Above his tight collar, his sleek head bulged, oddly large for his torso. His swarthy face was round, heavy-set, animated only by the extraordinary restlessness of his black eyes.

"How happy I would be," he was saying as Frayne entered, "to cooperate with Your Excellency for the improvement of the relations between our countries. But alas—my hands are tied. I can say no more." He shrugged sorrowfully.

The minister murmured something which Frayne did not catch.

"Alas, I cannot even do that!" Morales boomed in answer. "Humiliating as it is to admit the fact publicly, I, vice president of this republic, cannot even guarantee Your Excellency an interview with my president. Don Carlos is seeing no one save a certain few he desires to see. He is—in ill health."

The slight pause conveyed eloquently how, for his part, the astute General Morales doubted this subterfuge of illness on the part of his chief. His tone hinted that those few with whom the president delighted to confer were not only the enemies of the United States, but persons

whom he, Morales, would care to receive only in dungeons.

Frayne saw the American minister glance significantly at red-faced old Admiral Manning.

"Morales is clever," he thought, eyeing the Serranist vice president. "Damned clever."

HE moved a little closer, exchanging a word here and there with officers he knew. He wanted to present himself to the minister, but he wanted more to get a close-up of Morales.

Suddenly he found his path blocked by a rat-faced little man in the uniform of a Serrano colonel. Beady eyes twinkled at him wickedly; a pointed nose seemed to quiver with suppressed antagonism as the colonel favored Frayne with a stiff bow.

"Commander Frayne! What a pleasure to see you here!" squeaked a voice for all the world like a rusty door-hinge.

"It is a small world, señor—ah, pardon me—Colonel Uriarte," Frayne replied. "Are you still chief of police here?"

"Minister of Police," Uriarte corrected, eyeing Frayne with open malevolence. They had encountered each other once before, and Uriarte had not forgotten the humiliating defeat of that encounter.

"My congratulations!" Frayne murmured.

"You are staying long, commander?" asked Uriarte bluntly.

"That depends on the minister," Frayne answered. "I have brought him dispatches by plane, from Washington. He may have his replies ready tonight, perhaps—or perhaps tomorrow. Who can say?"

"I fear," murmured Uriarte, "that you will find our climate less healthy than at the time of your previous visit. This is the fever season, you know. I trust that your dispatches will be ready soon, *amigo mio*."

"Is it the fever which has confined the good Don Carlos to his country estate?" Frayne asked blandly.

"Ill-timed curiosity is sometimes a more fatal disease than fever! It is a fact that you would do well to remember." Uriarte passed on without leave-taking.

He was afraid, Frayne reflected, desperately afraid of what Frayne might find out. And he had permitted that fear to betray him into indiscretion. It was a point for Frayne.

There was a stir near the main entrance of the room. Glancing that way, Frayne saw a slender girl, wrapped in a black lace mantilla, pushing her way through the crowd. By her side was a tall young officer in the sky-blue uniform

of the president's bodyguard. He was expostulating with her, pleading, arguing—but she held her course, pausing only once to thrust aside a hand which he had ventured to lay upon her arm. In that moment, Frayne caught a glimpse of her face, an exquisite, olive-skinned oval. Her great dark eyes blazed now with a desperate purpose.

"Elena!" The word rose unbidden to Frayne's lips; but the discipline which years of duty had laid upon those lips held it soundless.

The sight of Elena Aranaga, daughter of the president, brought Frayne swift memories of happier hours, spent beneath the bougainvillas which shaded her father's garden. She did not see him now.

"Morales!" Her voice, high and clear as a bell, drew all eyes to her.

She stood before the vice president, her mantilla flung back, her brilliant gaze fixed on Morales.

A deathly silence fell upon the long room, and all eyes watched as Morales bowed, smiling a little.

"*Señorita*, I am at your feet," he murmured politely.

"I have waited for this moment!" she said, distinctly. "For this opportunity to ask you publicly, on neutral ground, one question. Francisco Morales, where is my father?"

Morales' smile grew soothing, though his eyes were deadly. "You are overwrought, *señorita*," he said gently. He turned to the staring American minister with a shrug that was eloquence itself. "She has lucid intervals, poor girl," he explained, "and sometimes they allow her too much freedom. I regret that the peace of Your Excellency's Legation should have been disturbed. Colonel Uriarte, will you escort the *señorita*—"

"You lie, Morales!" Elena's voice was chill with a terrible contempt, but she was keeping her head. "You have murdered—"

Uriarte's hand closed over her mouth. Aided by two other officers, he started to lead her toward the door. The tall youth, in uniform sprang forward, ripping out his sword. Only a quick dodge saved Uriarte. Elena stood free for a single moment—and in that moment, Frayne reached her side.

"Those stairs over there—quickly! You can do nothing more here," he whispered. She gave him a swift glance of recognition, then turned and darted past gaping spectators to reach the stairs and vanish upwards.

The young officer whirled on Morales, his naked sword still in his hand. "You

will answer to me, Morales." His free hand came up, struck the man's cheek a sharp, resounding blow.

MORALES' swarthy face paled slowly to a sort of dirty ash-color. It was the pallor of anger, not of fear.

"Take him away!" he choked out.

Uriarte and three or four others rushed suddenly upon the young man from behind.

"No," he shouted. "I—" Uriarte's pistol butt smashed into his mouth. Blood spattered, and the young officer's shouted words ended in a gasp of agony. Closely surrounded by Uriarte's aids, he was dragged out into the anteroom.

Frayne darted through a side door and along a short passage. A small, curtained alcove here gave access to the anteroom from the far side. Beyond the door sounded a muffled explosion, and Frayne opened the door and stepped in.

The young officer was lying on the floor, blood welling from a bullet-wound in his left breast. Near one outflung hand lay a pistol, with a faint wisp of smoke ascending from the muzzle. Uriarte and three or four other Serrano officers scowled at Frayne as he strode forward.

"He has shot himself, poor fellow," Uriarte said quickly. "*Dios!* What a fool a man will make of himself over a woman! We tried to stop him, but he was too quick for us."

"Stand back, please, *señoras*," Frayne requested. "This is American soil, and I represent the minister until he comes. Colonel Uriarte, you will have the goodness to send one of your officers to summon His Excellency."

He knelt as Uriarte turned to comply. His sharp eyes had discerned a faint movement of the boy's crushed and bloody lips. Just a whisper—a very faint whisper—came from the battered mouth.

"Torre—Blanco. . . . Tell Elena—" The whisper broke on a rattling gasp. The young life was over.

Frayne rose to his feet, to find Uriarte's eyes fixed upon him. The man had turned back suspiciously.

"He spoke, commander? He said something?" Uriarte inquired. "It is, of course, my affair to record all dying statements, bequests—"

"He said nothing," Frayne answered blandly.

He turned to face the agitated minister who came puffing into the room. Close behind the minister came Morales, all unbidden.

"Poor fellow," said he, looking down at the dead man. "But what would you? He loved the girl. Her mind—it is gone. And

so he no longer wishes to live. It is very sad."

"Who is he? I have seen him before, I think," the minister muttered, half-choked by horror.

"My aid, Captain Pedro de Ferrara," Morales answered. "This will be a blow to his family." He flicked a quick look at Uriarte.

Frayne, standing in the background, said nothing, but his mind was active. He was beginning to understand many things about this murdered boy—Morales' aid, and the lover of Elena Arana. The two loyalties had obviously led the poor fellow on diverging paths. There was food for thought. . .

"Where is the *señorita*?" Morales asked the minister suddenly.

Before the diplomat could reply Frayne spoke, "I will inquire, sir."

He went quickly out of the room, closing the door behind him, conscious all the time of Uriarte's rodent eyes upon him. He went up the main stairs two at a time. A servant indicated his own room, saying that the *señorita* had inquired for it.

Within that room, a faint perfume lingered. Elena was gone, but on the pillow was a note to him, scribbled hastily in pencil:

I dare not stay here. They would kill me. My father is not at his hacienda—that I swear. But I feel he is alive somewhere. Find him, for the love of God! E.

Frayne burned the note in a copper ash-tray, reduced the ashes to powder and blew them out of the window.

Then he went back downstairs to report to the minister. His face was devoid of expression, but his eyes were dark with thought.

IN a musty back room of an ancient house on the Calle San Martin, two men stood before a barred window, looking out into a moonlit patio. One wore the green field uniform of a sergeant in the Regiment Miranda. His face was hidden in the shadow beneath the visor of his cap. The other was the broad-shouldered stevedore who had spoken to Frayne in the *cantina*.

"When one lives in Puerto Serrano in these days, *señor*," the stevedore was saying, "one lives at the gates of hell. A friend disappears—and none dares to ask what has become of him."

"These things," said Philip Frayne, in Spanish that was the exact patois of the Serranista soldier he seemed to be, "are not the doing of Don Carlos Arana. I know that old gentleman well. He

is the true *caballero*. He would not harm his people."

"It is what all men say. He is beloved in this land—or was," the stevedore answered. "But now his reckless acts are bringing the marines again. It means machine guns, and shells and death. It is not well, *señor*. Serrano has not deserved such a fate."

"If only I could win speech—a single half-hour—with Don Carlos!" Frayne breathed. "You have made sure he has not left the country?"

"Not on any vessel which has sailed from this port since his last public appearance," the stevedore answered. "I have checked and cross-checked. I cannot be mistaken."

Frayne nodded. "Find him for me, Manuel. So shall you serve the land you love."

The stevedore's heavy face lighted. "I will do my best, *señor*!"

When he had left, Frayne began nervously pacing the candle-lit room. All of his agents had reported save one—Esteban. It was for Esteban he waited.

Esteban was a young fellow who had joined the army since Frayne had seen him last. He was a cousin of the stevedore, Manuel. It was upon Esteban that Frayne depended to obtain the countersign for the night. Thereafter he meant to enter the Fortress San Silvestre to make a closer inspection of the two towers, the more southerly of which was called El Torre Blanco. It was beneath El Torre Blanco that the dungeons lay.

The door opened suddenly. Frayne started forward a smile of greeting on his lips. But the faint glow of the guttering candle on the table illumined not the face of young Esteban, but the haggard features of Manuel, the stevedore. His forehead was beaded with sweat; his eyes seemed to protrude.

"What has happened?" asked Frayne quietly.

"Esteban! They shot him—in San Silvestre." The words came in little gasps.

"They knew then?"

"No." Manuel dropped into a chair, forced himself to be calm. "But he tried inquiries on his own behalf thinking thus to serve the *señor* better. He spoke to a comrade of the dungeons beneath the Torre Blanco. He was overheard."

Frayne shook his head wearily. Such things were the curse of Intelligence work—the efficient agent who tries to be over-efficient goes beyond his orders and gets caught.

"Esteban's family will be compensated," Frayne said steadily. "Now I must go."

IN front of the Fortress San Silvestre, on the landward side, was a small plaza, lighted only by the one feeble street-lamp and the sputtering arc light over the fortress gate.

Across the plaza strolled unconcernedly a young man in the uniform of a sergeant of the Regiment Miranda, pistol flapping on one hip, haversack on the other. From the corner of his eye, he noted the vigilance of the gate-guard, and saw how each person who entered was stopped and made to give the countersign.

A searchlight raked along the sea wall of the fortress, outlining tower and battlement in its eerie glare. The cruiser was also vigilant, a gray embodiment of death and destruction. Frayne's mind clicked faster over the possibility of getting the password to the dungeon. He watched the gate-guard, then smiled.

He knew the ways of these easy-going little soldiers. They were not all so vigilant.

Turning down a side street, he came presently on the inevitable sentry before the door of a dignitary's house. The man leaned against the wall half asleep. Frayne crept up behind him, on silent feet. He had snatched the man's rifle from his grip and was shaking him furiously by the shoulders before the sentry realized that anyone was near.

"Sleeping on post, *perro!*" snarled Frayne. "You shall face a firing squad for this! Suppose the *Americanos* came?"

The stricken sentry began to tremble. His face was a pale, frightened blur in the gloom, from which piteous bleatings came.

"Have pity, *sargento!* I but dozed a little. Do not report me!"

"Bah! You're drunk," accused Frayne, catching the odor of raw native rum on the fellow's breath. "What use is a drunken sentry? You shall be made an example."

"No! Mercy, *sargento!*"

"I take no risks with such swine," Frayne grated. "Why, I'll wager your fuddled brain can't even remember the countersign."

"Ah, *et, si, mi sargento!*" cried the man eagerly. "It is 'Santa Ana.' *Mira*—do I not remember? Is that not right?"

"Well, let this be a lesson to you," grunted Frayne grudgingly, handing back the man's rifle. "Don't let me catch you sleeping again, understand?"

"Thank you, *mi sargento*. I will be very careful," the sentry promised, with quivering gratitude.

Frayne went on his way, suppressing a chuckle till he was safely round the next corner and headed for the little plaza

again. Boldly, he walked up to the gate of the fortress.

A sentry's bayonet dropped to the charge. "*Alto! Quién viva?*"

"Santa Ana!" he answered carelessly, never pausing.

"*Paso!*" The sentry came to the order. The corporal of the guard barely glanced at Frayne. There were many new faces in the Serrano regiments these days.

Frayne drew a long breath. He was inside the Fortress San Silvestre—but he was still a long way from the dungeons of the Torre Blanco.

The courtyard was full of soldiers and policemen in uniforms, most of them lounging about as though waiting for some order. Before the iron door of the Torre Blanco, in the far corner of the yard, a watch-fire burned, and two sentinels paced up and down.

There was no chance of getting in that way.

Frayne ascended the steps of the main keep. A servant, hurrying through the great doors bearing a bottle, stared at him curiously, but no one stopped him as he passed on into the entrance hall. Directly in front of him were the doors leading into the great *sala*. They were closed. A line of light showed beneath. Frayne strolled toward them, intending to listen for sounds within.

He was within five paces when one of the doors suddenly opened and Uriarte stepped out.

FRAYNE had just time to step into the shadows of a curving staircase.

Uriarte passed him, head down, deep in thought. He went to the great front doors, closed them and locked them. Then he crossed the hall to a closet and dragged out a trunk. An empty trunk, it appeared to be, from the ease with which he handled it.

He dragged the trunk into the great *sala*, and, under cover of the noise, Frayne slipped to the door, which Uriarte had left partly open.

Uriarte was alone in the *sala*. He had opened the trunk and was looking into it. His face was alight, for a moment, with a mirth that was purely savage.

"Close quarters for a great man," he muttered. "But it will serve."

He walked over to a French window and looked out, parting the heavy curtains. Then he nodded, as if with satisfaction at what he saw. The nod became a jerk of furious surprise as he heard the soft click of the door Frayne had just closed behind him.

He whirled, grabbing for his holstered automatic, but he had no time to draw the weapon. His teeth clicked together as

Frayne's fist lashed home to the point of his jaw. He crumpled to the floor.

Swiftly, efficiently, Frayne bound him with cords torn from the draperies. He rolled the unconscious man under a couch and stood erect, panting a little. The *sala's* doors had no bolt, but Frayne did not fear interruption. He knew that few people were allowed in this *sala* at night.

Then he, too, went to the French window and looked out. A motor car stood at the side portico, its chauffeur a dark and waiting figure inside it. After one swift glance around, Frayne walked over to a great tapestry on the south wall, slipped behind it and felt over the paneling of the wall behind with practiced fingers. The secrets of San Silvestre were no secrets to Frayne. He had not wasted his time on his previous visit to Serrano.

Where was the spring?

A puff of cold air touched his face. His hand had found the edge of the panel—opened it further. He stepped through. There was no going back now—even if death waited there in the damp darkness.

The passage sloped downward as he moved silently along, pausing occasionally to listen. He heard nothing save the scampering of rats, and the drip of fetid water from the roof and walls.

He came to a low door that was open. Moonlight filtered into the cell within, through a barred window, beyond which he heard the lap of waves against stone.

He passed on. The passage turned abruptly to the left. Frayne pushed his head cautiously around the corner, and saw, far along the stone-walled corridor, a lantern's faint gleam. That gleam came through a barred wicket in a door which closed the end of the passage. The passage itself was all darkness and silence.

Frayne moved cautiously round the corner. His fingers, feeling along the outer wall, came to another door. This one was not open—far from it. There were three great iron bars, each secured by a separate and ponderous padlock. The huge door lock had a keyhole for a key that must weigh a couple of pounds.

The long-dead Spaniards who had built this Castle of San Silvestre were men who believed in taking no chances with prisoners.

Frayne stooped and looked through the keyhole, but could see nothing save a faint gleam of moonlight. This dungeon, too, opened on the outer face of the tower.

He put his ear to the rusty iron, and heard the waves—then something else. His ear caught a murmuring, as of a voice in prayer. It was a feeble, quavering voice, yet one which held a hint of

indomitable resolution, for all its feebleness.

"Ah, *Diós mio—padre de merced—*"

It was in truth, a prayer.

The voice struggled on. "Father of mercy, grant me only this. I must die. I do not ask for life. But grant that my death may, by Thy infinite wisdom, be of service to my people. Hear me. . . ."

The voice was the voice of Don Carlos Aranaga, President of Serrano.

FRAYNE knew that voice well. Often he had talked with the man who was known as "the good Don Carlos." Now he lay here in this dungeon, with the chill and the damp rotting his frail life away.

Chains clanked faintly within the door. Frayne moved his lips to the keyhole to speak some word of reassurance. The word was never spoken.

Suddenly, silently, he was borne to the floor beneath the savage assault of a man who had sprung upon him from behind. Years of Intelligence service had built up within Frayne reflexes which could not be taken by surprise, and even as he went down, he rolled sidewise, kicked back once—viciously—and twisted to his knees.

He felt a blade bite into the flesh of his thigh. Then his left hand struck, went home against a heaving chest, while his right was already ripping open his holster.

Then his enemy broke the silence with a roar. "The guard!" bawled his frantic voice. "To me! The guard!"

Frayne knew that voice, too. It was Morales' voice.

The door at the end of the corridor crashed open. Hobnailed boots clattered over the stone floor. Frayne had but one thought—to escape with the priceless knowledge he had won.

He kicked himself free of Morales' clutching hand, taking another knife-cut in the leg as he did so. Then he was running for his life. Up the sloping corridor he panted, warm blood streaming down his leg.

Behind him, the pursuit checked a moment as the guard reached Morales, then tore on. A pistol barked, and a bullet whined past, clipping the stone beside Frayne's head. At last his outstretched hand touched the panel.

He leaped through it into the *sala*, slammed the panel shut, and dashed for the French window. He knew now what that empty trunk was for—and the waiting car. He guessed what orders the chauffeur would have.

The window opened at his touch. He ran across the portico, down two steps

and so to the car. Bounding in, he hurled orders at the chauffeur.

"*Vamos! Pronto!*" he shouted, in a tone of authority which brooked no argument.

Gears clashed as the man obeyed. The motor roared, and the car slid out of the shadows of the portico, heading across the courtyard for the open gate.

Only then did Frayne become aware of something hard which nudged him in the ribs; of a voice which purred in his ear, "Why so fast, my very excellent Commander Frayne?"

His head snapped round. In the far corner of the seat sat Uriarte, his rat's eyes aglow with triumph.

"**Y**OU really should have gagged me, you know," murmured Uriarte, "with the chauffeur within call. Sit still!"

A pistol muzzle bored deep into Frayne's ribs. He was neatly trapped.

"I thought you'd try this trick," Uriarte smiled, then raised his voice. "Around the drive and back into the portico, Juan. Don't go out of the gate. I think perhaps we shall be awaited in the *sala*."

They were passing the gate. Frayne's hand was still on the handle of the car door. Uriarte had made his presence known as Frayne was in the act of closing it. If they got him back into the *sala*, there was no hope.

Into Frayne's mind popped a precept of his old chief, Admiral Garfield. "Where there is only one chance to win, take it—whatever the risk," the admiral had said to him many times.

He flung the door open and leaped out as the car slowed for the turn. Uriarte, startled, fired wildly, and missed.

Frayne dashed for the gate, yelling, "Turn out the guard! Prisoners escaping in that car!"

Behind him, Uriarte was fumbling at the car door, howling imprecations. The guard came swarming out—three non-commissioned officers shouting excited and contradictory orders.

Frayne, giving other commands as loudly as the rest, dashed past them, through the gate, and out into the plaza. Half a dozen rifle-shots crackled from the gate. Bullets whined close as Uriarte finally made his presence felt. Frayne raced for the opening of a dark street across the plaza, losing time in zigzagging as he went.

Despair clutched at him as he saw the lights of the car lurch out of the gate. Soldiers clung to the running board. They would get him now.

There was only one chance—the motor

boat from the *Hartford* lying at the customhouse pier, but the pier was blocks away. Frayne dashed down the dark street toward it, just as a volley chipped the walls of the house at the corner. The car was coming across the plaza, cutting recklessly over the grass.

A second car, running without lights, came up the street at top speed. Frayne saw it, knew why it was there. He waved it on as it passed. There was no chance, for the lights of Uriarte's car were already at the far end of the street. They would surely see him now. He could not hope to reach the end of the block. Every house door seemed tightly closed, hemming him in. He was trapped. . . .

The light of the car suddenly caught his flying figure as he ran on. A shout of triumph rose—to be drowned in a terrific crash as the lightless car swung head-on into that of the pursuers. Screams of rage and agony rang in Frayne's ears as he dodged around the next corner into the Avenida Febrero. The customhouse pier lay at the foot of that thoroughfare, he knew.

He signaled a taxi, and jumped in. As he settled back on the seat, his hand rose to his visor in salute to a gallant comrade.

Manuel, as previously arranged, had been at hand with the getaway car, cruising round the block, waiting. He had seen that there was no chance to turn, and he had done the next best thing—crashed straight into the pursuing auto. It would mean death for Manuel, either in the wreck, or at the hands of the infuriated Morales. Manuel had known that, yet had not hesitated.

"We take our chances in this business. . . ."

Five minutes later, Frayne stepped into the stern-sheets of the *Hartford's* boat, and heard her coxswain's welcome order, "Shove off!"

IN the admiral's cabin of the cruiser, three men sat about a green-draped table. They were Admiral Manning, bluff of manner and seamed of face; the American minister to Serrano, nervous and fidgety; and Frayne, whose calm exterior hid the rising tide of anger within.

The wounds on his leg had been superficial. They were bandaged and dressed now, and though they were painful, they were as nothing to his agony of spirit.

"Voices—voices in the darkness. That's all you have to go on, Commander Frayne," the minister summed up.

"I'm absolutely certain," Frayne replied. "I'll stake my reputation on it."

"All very well," rumbled the admiral, "but I won't stake mine."

"I believe in Morales. He's a man of education, of culture," the minister insisted. "He's not one of your murdering cutthroats like Zelaya. Continued co-operation with him is our proper policy—even if it means landing the marines."

Frayne leaned forward, holding himself in leash. "Can't you see, gentlemen," he reasoned, "how Morales is playing the game? The anti-Morales acts which have brought us all here have unquestionably been his work, but they have been done in Don Carlos' name. Before the world, Don Carlos bears the responsibility. If we can obtain no satisfaction from Don Carlos, we will be compelled to use force. Then, for the bloodshed that follows, Don Carlos will become a traitor in the eyes of his own people. After we withdraw, Morales is left in power. Don Carlos will never be heard of again. Gentlemen, are you going to stand by and let this scheming rascal make a catspaw of the United States of America?"

The admiral flushed brick-red, but the minister only made a weary gesture.

"We've been over all that, commander," he said. "Your evidence may be convincing to you, but to me it is just a collection of surmises colored by imagination. I know Morales. It is my considered opinion that we can do no better than to secure his succession to the presidency of Serrano."

Frayne rose to his feet. He thought of his letter of authority, but he thought also of his orders: "Don't use that authority unless you have to." There was another way.

"Suppose I can bring you unimpeachable proof, sir," he said, speaking directly to the minister, "that Don Carlos Aranaga is actually confined in a dungeon of the Torre Blanco? Proof that even you cannot question?"

"That," the minister admitted, "will be quite a different matter. But the proof must be complete. Complete," he repeated, as though liking the finality of the word. He glanced at the admiral with a faint lifting of eyebrows.

"It will be," promised Frayne.

THE whaleboat's crew lay to on their muffled oars, a hundred yards from the sea wall of the Torre Blanco. It was the hour of darkest darkness, just before the swift-coming tropic dawn.

"Is this close enough, sir?" whispered the young ensign in charge.

"Plenty," answered Frayne. "Any closer and you might be seen or heard by a sentry on the wall. Keep her here, against the pull of the tide. Use your oars as little as possible."

"Good luck, sir," the ensign muttered, a trifle awed.

Frayne slipped over the stern of the boat, and with silent strokes swam steadily for the shore. About his neck was strapped a water-tight case containing a small but very efficient camera, and a flashlight.

It was not long before he felt the sloping rubble of the foundations under his feet. Above him, an overhanging turret jutted out. He heard a sentry's clear call, "*Numero cinco—se-e-e-e-no!*"

Number five—all serene. Frayne smiled briefly in the darkness at that naive assumption.

Beneath the overhanging turret, he crept up to the wall. The stones cut through to his knees; the salt water stung his bandaged wounds. He crawled steadily along until he found a barred opening, set flush with the edge of the sloping foundation.

He listened. Within, all was silent. Frayne took out his flashlight, thrust an arm inside lest a gleam should attract attention from the wall, and flicked a quick inquiring ray about the cell within. It was empty, and the door was open.

He crawled on, to his right, and as he approached the next opening, he heard voices.

Morales' deep bass rumbled the last of a threat. "... fool, Aranaga! You can end all this by giving me your word of honor to indorse my acts publicly. You can't stand much more. Why throw your life away?"

A faint groan answered; then came Aranaga's voice, feeble but resolute. "I can endure," said Don Carlos Aranaga.

Morales' snarl was the snarl of an enraged animal. It was followed by the sound of a sharp blow and a stifled groan from Don Carlos. By this time, Frayne had reached the window of the cell.

Within, a lantern burned dimly. By its light, he could see the aged president, chained fast, as though crucified to the farther wall of the dungeon, arms outspread, head hanging on his breast. Beside him, like a dark fiend in the pit of hell, stood the shadowy bulk of Morales.

The blow sounded again. Morales was striking the emaciated old man with a leather paddle. It came to Frayne, as he looked upon that dreadful scene, that Morales had spoken the truth. Don Carlos could not stand much more of this.

Then, afterwards, the trunk waited. In Aranaga's hacienda, doubtless a fine set-up for a suicide verdict would be arranged. The papers would carry the story. Don Carlos Aranaga, having brought such ills upon his country by his arrogance toward the United States, takes his

own life rather than face the fury of his people—his people, to whom he had been almost a god.

Morales was forcing the issue. He did not know how much Frayne had discovered. He must hurry, now, to the pitiless end of the course he had planned for himself. The course of empire.

Frayne had intended to wait for dawn and then, as the first rays of the eastern sun shone directly through the window, to use his camera for that "complete proof" which the minister had demanded of Don Carlos' presence in the dungeon.

He had thought Morales would not dare attempt the removal of Don Carlos that night, fearing American spies might be watching. But now—suppose Don Carlos died under the torture. Morales would arrange his suicide plant right there in the fortress, in the presidential suite itself, perhaps. And there would be only Frayne's unsupported word for proof. That, he knew, was not enough.

If only dawn would come! But the darkness remained impenetrable, clinging about Frayne like a pall. If he only had a flash outfit . . .

"Speak, you stubborn old fool!" growled Morales.

A groan, fainter than before, was the only answer. Frayne was unarmed. He could do nothing to help Aranaga, with nothing but a camera and a pocket torch. A wild chance occurred to him. It was just possible, that with light . . .

FRAYNE backed cautiously away from that window of horror, and stood erect, pressing back against the wall. The turret jutted out fully four feet, high above his head. Cupping one hand under the lens of his pocket torch, so that the light should not gleam on the water, he pointed it at the distant lights of the cruiser and began a series of flashes.

If the sentry saw him, he was done for. It seemed an age before, at last, the blinker at the *Hartford's* masthead winked suddenly into staccato action.

Now Frayne worked the button of his little torch in a swift message. "Turn two searchlights on this spot and hold till you see me run for the water," his dots and dashes flickered. "Then turn all searchlights on wall to blind riflemen."

"Acknowledge," blinked the *Hartford*.

Frayne crawled back to the window—just in time to hear another blow, another still fainter groan, and yet another curse from Morales. The sands of Don Carlos' life were swiftly running out.

A long white sword of light leaped suddenly into the sky from the *Hartford's* searchlight tower. Another joined it, sweeping across the dark heavens in great

arcs. Then, like striking blades, the lights crept downward, and Frayne blinked as the darkness fell away.

The cell was suddenly lighted by a blue-white glare, blinding, dazzling.

"*Madre de Dios!*" screamed a fear-crazed Morales. Jerking out a dagger, he plunged it into the emaciated breast of Don Carlos—just as Frayne's camera shutter clicked, and clicked again.

Morales staggered back, staring at the window, shielding his eyes from the light while his features writhed with his awful fear. It was as though the eye of God had looked in upon his crimes. Don Carlos sagged in his chains, blood running down his tortured body. Blood dripped from the dagger which Morales still held—and again the inexorable camera clicked to record the tragic situation.

Shouts came from the wall above. A rifle spat from an adjoining turret; a bullet smacked against the stones at Frayne's feet and went whining off into space.

Frayne stuffed his camera into its case, pulled the case tight, stumbled down the slope for the water. A bullet whistled above his wet hair. Then the searchlights lifted, were joined by two others, raking the walltop and turrets with their blinding rays. In the shelter of the lower darkness, Frayne plunged into the sea and swam for the waiting boat.

When he reached the cruiser, he did not at once go to the cabin to report. He headed straight for the photographic section and pulled the dazed ship's photographer from his hammock.

Beneath the red light of the dark-room, he waited with taut nerves, while the negatives were developed. When he had looked at them, he nodded with grim satisfaction, and gave strange orders to the photographer. Don Aranaga's agony lay revealed in harsh black and white.

A few moments later, the minister and the admiral were bending over the four still-wet prints which Frayne laid before them.

"Is the proof complete, sir?" asked Frayne.

"Yes," growled the admiral.

"It is complete. But—" the minister looked troubled—"I think we ought to report the situation to Washington by radio and ask for orders. This is quite unprecedented.

Frayne had expected this. And he knew that even one day's delay would give Morales time to entrench himself in the presidential office of Serrano. Frayne turned away to hide the expression on his face, for in his eyes was the determination to act—without orders.

THROUGH the narrow streets of Puerto Serrano, a man fled for his life. Every door was closed against him. From the upper windows, men and women and even children rained missiles and maledictions upon him as he ran.

Behind him ravened a howling mob, brandishing rifles, machetes, knives, clubs. These were the men of the back country, who had traveled to the city all one day and night and the next day, grim, determined, bent on vengeance. They were the peons and miners and *vaqueros*, rough, rock-hard men who revered Don Carlos Aranaga almost as a patron saint.

Deserted by his soldiers, abandoned to his fate, Francisco Fernando Morales fled toward the docks, hoping to gain the American cruiser, the one sanctuary left him in all the city which only yesterday he had ruled with an iron hand.

He was hatless, coatless. His shirt and trousers hung in tattered ribbons about his laboring limbs. Blood streaked his face and neck and body as he staggered on—his fear-dazed mind still stunned by the swift descent of this ragged horde.

From the deck of the *Hartford*, a group of officers watched the grim finish of the race through field glasses. Beside them stood two civilians, the American minister and Elena Aranaga, who had sought refuge aboard the cruiser early that morning. The girl's eyes were tragic, but she watched the terrible scene with an unflinching gaze.

"This is terrible—terrible!" muttered the minister.

Morales had reached the end of the pier, but there were no boats there. A launch from the *Hartford*, ordered in by the admiral on a mission of rescue, was not yet halfway to the shore.

Morales looked at the dark, swirling water, shrank back, then turned at bay. He lifted high his bloody arms—and one scream came clearly to the ears of the officers on the *Hartford*.

Then the mob was upon him. Machetes swung high, flashed down—and came up again, no longer flashing. Morales went down under a score of struggling bodies. Men fought like wolves to get to their victim, to have a share in his destruction, in his gruesome death.

Frayne reached out and took the glass from Elena's grasp. For the avengers of blood were tearing what remained of Francisco Morales to pieces with their bare hands. It is not good for women to look upon such things.

"This is your doing, Philip," said Elena Aranaga softly. "It is well done."

Frayne nodded. "Better," said he, "than waiting for orders from Washington—and giving time for Morales to stage his murder as a suicide. But you had your share in it—you and your friends who rode all night and day with the prints through every village and province of Serrano."

Tears came at last to Elena's eyes, streamed down her pale face.

"Don't weep for your father, Elena," Frayne begged. "He had his last wish—that his death might benefit his country. Morales is dead now, and your father's friends will come into power. There will be peace, peace with honor. The soul of Don Carlos will rest well."

"A dreadful death," the minister was muttering.

"Richly deserved. Glad the boat didn't get there," snapped the admiral. "But what happened? Who stirred up that mob?"

Frayne smiled. "Photographs are useful things," he said. "I showed you four prints; I had a hundred more made. The stout peons of Serrano may not be able to read, sir, but they can certainly understand photographs."

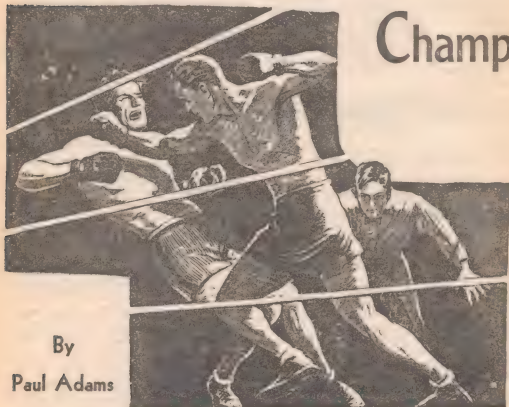
He moved off toward the wardrobe hatch. The urge for sleep was heavy in his tired body. He did not even see the eyes of Elena Aranaga upon him as he went. He could not look back, for tomorrow—duty would beckon again.



• **Boxing**

The Dressing-Room

Champ



By
Paul Adams

He was a slap-happy chump who ended his fights counting the seams on the canvas. But he played a long-shot risk on a remedy he knew was not a cure.

THE manager sneered. The Kid went white. And in the arena the fight-mad customers bellowed over the delay of the semi-windup. Desperately Fletch Brandell struggled for self-control. But he was hopeless. Heading for the ring, he suffered all the agony of a terror-crazed wretch on his way to the death chamber.

"Your last chance, hound!" snarled Dude McCafferty, his manager. "If you

go into the tank tonight, you're washed up—an' I'm not crackin' wise. Glue that to your alleged mind, slug. End up countin' the seams, an' I'll street you."

Fletch shuffled into the arena. He recoiled from the madhouse din. McCafferty sent him ahead with a lift of his knee.

"It ain't time to faint yet, tanker!" the manager growled. "You've sure made a prize sap outta me. Six months ago I had you tabbed as a million bucks on the hoof.

You looked like a champ, fightin' curtain raisers. I angle you into the semi-windup class, an' what happens? In your last seven starts, you've sniffed resin thirty-one times! That's a pay-off. The color I mistook for gold must 'a' been your yellow streak."

The lightweight burned energy reveling himself, flaying his soul with self-condemnation. Packy Gahagan, his ring foe, was already working his shoes in the resin when Fletch stumbled through the ropes. A square-cut fighting harp, Packy was built for the rough going. He eyed his pale opponent with sardonic relish.

Fletch attempted to dance around, but the steel spring in his legs had turned to cast iron. The gallery boys hooted at him. Fletch's profile bore too close a resemblance to a collar ad. The scoff-laws preferred the Gahagan style of beauty, a mushroomed nose and a jaw like the business end of an anvil.

After the referee's instructions, Fletch dragged back to his corner. He smiled at a pretty, anxious-eyed blonde in a ring-side seat. Panic clawed at him. Trina Forbes had journeyed from New York to watch him fight. She was pale. Her pulse-quickenings smile failed to hide the fear and dread in her luminous eyes. For her the bout would be a nerve-racking ordeal.

They'd been childhood sweethearts, and the bond still existed. At the outset she had approved of a ring career. But that was before she'd seen him kiss the canvas time after time, battered into a crimsoned pulp by the gloves of third-raters. She'd begged him to quit. And after tonight's slaughter, there'd be more tears and another heart-rending plea.

Fletch's cold-eyed manager snatched away the robe. Eyes widened. The fighter looked like something. The build was there, the suggestion of speed and power. He had a splendid breadth of shoulders and the legs of a sprinter. But a million dollar body was just an ornament if a man had a vacuum for a heart.

"Go out an' fight that slob off his pins!" rasped Dude McCafferty. "After tonight, it's either the headlines or the breadlines!"

A product of Broadway and its side streets, Dude McCafferty represented the larceny department of professional sport. He was a chiseler who was never swerved by any emotion higher than the desire to grab off all he could.

"I'll fight," muttered Fletch. "I'll show this fellow so much leather, he'll get groggy every time he sees a glove."

Fletch's voice sounded hollow, unconvincing. He knew he was whipped. That terrible gnawing in his stomach was evidence enough. He vilified himself as the lowest of life's flops, a guy who was licked before he tried.

The kid wished that a beam would fall on him. For ten years the ring had been his goal. For ten years he'd trained, practicing rigid denial and schooling himself in the boxing craft. And here was the finished product, an animated streak of yellow, a sacrificial offering for the greedy fists of a gritty little assassin. He was the worm of Fistian, a canvas kisser.

Bong! Life fled from Fletch's legs. Woodenly he moved out. He knew he should be dancing lightly, edging in to saddle his foe with flashy footwork, feinting and bullying him into a corner where he could uncork the ether. But he stood like a fear-frozen amateur.

McCafferty cursed. The crowd roared. And Packy Gahagan hitched up his aged, ring-worn black trunks, and stalked in for the massacre. He clubbed in a left to the ear that teetered Fletch. Again he shot for the head. Fletch's guard went up, and Gahagan plopped a hook wrist-deep into the kid's midriff. The kid jackknifed, kissing the canvas.

The mob howled for a killing. Trina Forbes closed her eyes. Trembling fingers ripped her handkerchief. Back of Fletch's corner, Dude McCafferty took out a contract and started to tear it. Then he paused, eyed the floored fighter speculatively and restored the document to his pocket.

In ring center Fletch was desperately pawing the air for the ropes. His torso was a blaze of pain. Twice he struggled to his knees and sprawled out. But at the nine count he was up, spraddle-legged and paralyzed. Gahagan romped in, slinging hot leather. He shook Fletch with staggering one-tuos, and the kid hit the deck under a terrific bombardment to the solar plexus region.

Again and again Fletch climbed off the floor amid the jeers of the crowd. White-faced and sobbing, the girl fled from the arena. The kid's mind was blank, save for one maddening thought that thrabbed through it to the deadly rhythm of Packy

Gahagan's pounding mitts. Yellow—yellow—yellow. . . . The word was a hideous ogre wrapping him in jaundiced tentacles.

The fifth knockdown saw Fletch struggling onto rubbery legs at the count of two. His eyes had gone into a glassy stare, and he had absorbed all that the law allowed.

By now Dude McCafferty was studying Packy Gahagan with a shrewd, covetous eye. When the slugger spread the kid with the lullaby punch, McCafferty could see no one but Gahagan. He was blind to the bruised, blood-drenched wreck on the floor, writhing and clawing to get up.

TWO days later Fletch Brandell was in New York, training at the Midtown Gym. He was working out because McCafferty ordered it. Yet the brittle manager had left no doubt that Fletch was through. The fury of the wisenheimer's outbursts still burned in the fighter's mind. Sick at heart, Fletch merely went through the motions. Even so, he displayed the speed and feline grace of a champ.

McCafferty now had Packy Gahagan in tow, spiked down with a five-year contract. Fletch felt like a runner plugging into a last-lap spurt after a rival had broken the tape. The brutal McCafferty had made a gesture of ironic kindness, offering Fletch a job training and rubbing Gahagan. McCafferty had got ugly at the refusal.

"Okay, wet smack!" he'd snarled at Fletch in the Midtown dressing room. "You've cost me plenty of valuable time, an' I don't finish on the losin' end to nobody. I've cooked up a little scheme that might net me something. An' you're helpin', see? Today you put on the champ act. Do the stuff that had me bluffed goofy."

On the gym floor the lightweight saw McCafferty talking to Pop Skeggs, a veteran who'd managed three world champions. Once Fletch would have thought himself the luckiest man living to have Skeggs managing him. But even a champ-maker couldn't do much with a canvas kisser.

Fletch shadow boxed across the floor behind the two.

"I'm not sap enough to try the high-pressure stuff on you, Skeggs," McCafferty was saying. "You've been around too long for a punk like me to trip up. I'm only askin' you to look the kid over. You'll

think you're starin' at Leonard in his prime."

Skeggs yawned. "They all look like Leonard when you pikers tell it," drawled the gray old man. "I'm getting out, McCafferty. I'm dated. Belong back in the days when the boys still grew hair on their chests. I don't like the brand of perfume used by you gents who manage crooners and tap dancers."

"Just watch Brandell," pleaded McCafferty.

"I'm not in the market," said Skeggs. "I don't like the kind of dough that comes from having a kid's brains added."

"If he doesn't show anything," persisted McCafferty, "I'll buy you a hat. Why, in Pennsylvania he chalked up ten straight kayoes."

Quite true. But McCafferty neglected to add that those fights had been curtain raisers.

"I hate to get rid of the kid," the manager was saying. "But I've got another proposition that'll have me rollin' in velvet for life, an' I can't do justice by Brandell."

In the ring Fletch boxed Steamboat Travis, trial horse of the welters. Travis could still lay 'em in, and he was a hard old fox to trap. But the trade had grown tired of seeing his war-torn map.

Fletch had the old master looking like an amateur. His left worked like a riveting hammer on Steamboat's pan. He feinted the heavier man into knots and beat him to the punch. Fletch's footwork was reminiscent of Jim Corbett, but he was willing to stand toe to toe and trade. He took Steamboat's malleting right-handers without wilting, and then fought him to the ropes in savage rallies. Fletch showed all the stuff that, clogged together in one fighting machine, makes a champ.

McCafferty and Skeggs weren't around when the kid left the ring, but coming out of the dressing room in his street clothes, Fletch was met by the old manager.

"Well, son," Skeggs spoke jovially, shaking the fighter's hand, "I thought your kind were all gone. I was planning to buy a little chicken farm out on Long Island. But when you went into action, I reached for my bank roll. I shelled out a thousand bucks, everything I had, to get your contract, lad. But you're the best investment I've ever made."

The lightweight wanted to tell Pop

Skeggs that he'd been swindled, that McCafferty had pawned the fighter, because Fletch was a cheap bill of goods. But the kid didn't know how to get it across. Skeggs had stamped him with an expert's appraisal, and he wouldn't understand.

Even the fighter didn't understand. Why should a craftsman have fear when he knows he has the skill and the proper tools? Fletch had seen men drop before his dynamiting fists. In the gym he'd outpointed club stars and title contenders. He didn't have a glass jaw and his torso was armed with muscle. Fletch could find no answer save the one which all but drove him mad—that he had saffron in his makeup. Promoters would feature an unknown managed by Pop Skeggs just on the old gentleman's word.

The next day the veteran got answers to a dozen wires. He accepted a main event in Binghamton.

"Don't you think we ought to start with a curtain raiser?" the fighter asked. It wasn't fear this time, but the prompting of a tremendous urge to show his new manager what he could do.

Skeggs laughed. "That doesn't sound like a youngster with your class. Does a man run for mayor when he can be governor?"

FOR his star bout in Binghamton, Fletch was right. He'd taken inventory, and he'd put the slug on those silly notions of cowardice. No blue funk would seep in to sap his strength tonight. He only wished he was getting a bang at the champ, instead of facing a free-style swinger made to order for him.

"I've got you booked for a month, son," said Pop Skeggs jubilantly. "We'll barnstorm a while. Then it's New York and the big time."

"Don't you want a contract?" asked Fletch.

Skeggs smiled. "I've sized you up, lad. We'll work on a gentlemen's agreement. But you mentioned something about a duplicate contract that McCafferty gave you. That ought to be destroyed. There'll be plenty of the boys trying to get their hooks into us when we start scooping up the heavy sugar."

Fletch got the ring call. Eager-eyed and vibrantly alive, he jogged into the arena. The roar of the mob used to chill him. Now he thrilled to that riotous din. He'd show these experts that Pop Skeggs

still could pick 'em. Fletch went in with the confidence of a champion. He was keyed up as taut as a guy wire. He was impatient for the bell, as restless as a race horse fretting and quivering at the barrier.

The gong sent him out gliding, stalking, eyes glowing. His opponent Kirk charged like a snorting bull. Fletch shifted him to low speed with a leaping left. His foe couldn't get to him. That jolting jab soon pulped Kirk's face to a raw, swollen blob. Fletch shook his head. It wasn't a contest. Why prolong the agony? He let go a right.

Kirk blocked it neatly—with his chin. His knees sagged and his guard lowered. Fletch measured his groggy foe and rocked him with a slashing hook. Sinking, Kirk's fighting heart asserted itself. He lashed out. It was a clumsy, slow-freight right, a push-punch delivered off balance and lacking steam. It touched Fletch in the midriff.

A frenzied roar burst from the crowd. His face ashen and his eyes wild, Skeggs dug his nails into the edge of the ring. Fletch was on the canvas, floored by a powder-puff punch. That blow wouldn't have crashed through a paper bag. Yet Fletch lay as stiff as a frozen fish.

Kirk beat the count. Out on his feet, he was mumbling to himself and flailing at space. A single blow would have toppled him, but Fletch wasn't there to check him out. Fletch was still in the resin dust.

Pop Skeggs tried to cheer the kid. "Just a fluke, son. Liable to happen to any fighter. He got you while you were taking a breath and your muscles were relaxed. Forget it. Leonard had his Shugrue. Schmeling was dialed out in a round by Joe Louis."

Fletch couldn't forget it. Skeggs was wrong. Those thick ridges of muscle banding the fighter's torso had been tensed. The defeat crushed Fletch, gave him the answer he had been dreading. He was in the wrong business.

He knew he should quit, but he couldn't and still keep a remnant of self-respect. Yet the end was near. Skeggs wouldn't be fooled long. For Pop's sake, Fletch brooded behind a fixed smile and a mask of enthusiasm. Either Skeggs was a good actor, or he hadn't caught the significance of that knockout, for he talked of the title in terms of deferred ownership.

In upstate cities Fletch went to the

post five times. He fought valiantly. He fought like a demon. And every fight saw him on the canvas in the first round. Once he made seven trips to the floor. Yet lashed on by the madness of torturing desperation, he managed to edge out in front.

The toll of those victories was long nightmares of pain. Coming back after a savage first-round beating, stripped of his flash, he'd keep forging in until his foe had punched himself into exhaustion.

That deadly fear of losing was wrecking Fletch. He didn't realize he was slowing down, that he was getting thick-tongued and brain fogged. His hands grew palsied. His left leg dragged, and already there was a waltz to his stride. Pop Skeggs watched him, saying nothing. But he stopped booking fights, though the fans demanded the canvas kisser who kept climbing off the blood-splotched floor.

The kid begged for ring work. His manner was almost fanatical. When the manager shook his head, Fletch accused him of falling down on their agreement.

THEY were in their hotel room one evening when a fire engine clanged. Fletch's muscles twitched. He bounded from his chair and began shadow boxing. Skeggs uttered a low moan and threw his arms around the fighter.

"Sit down, son," he said gently. "Don't you see? You can't go on. You're glove-shocked. It won't last. But a few more fights, and you'd be all messed up. You've got a brain, lad. That brain is going to get you places. You don't want it jarred muddy by a lot of pugnglies. You don't want to end up a mumbling old bum in a psychopathic ward."

Fletch was sobbing. This meant exile from the world he loved. This meant the collapse of a glorious dream.

"But the money," he muttered. "The money you spent for the contract. I've failed you, and I've got to pay—"

Skeggs laughed and gripped Fletch's shoulder. "That was my gamble. And it was the smartest dough I ever laid out. Because I got you out of McCafferty's hands, and out of this racket in time. You can't put a price tag on that, son. Forget the money, and don't worry about me."

In the morning the old-timer was gone. On the table Fletch found a few five-dol-

lar bills and a note begging him to get a job. Skeggs had left him the last of his bank roll.

Fletch returned to New York and his garret room. Under the skylight stood an easel with a half-finished canvas of a prize fight. Other canvasses were piled against the wall. Encouraged by Trina, he had drawn and painted since childhood. His work was neither very good nor very bad, but professionals had urged him to keep plugging. Fletch had dreamed of swinging into an art career after hanging up the gloves. Now he dreamed of nothing.

His ambitions had robbed him of the simple pleasures. And with his aspirations blotted by failure, he was devoid of zest. He felt age-weary. Life had been reduced to the dull business of keeping alive. Daily he trudged the rounds of the crowded employment agencies. His money dwindled. His landlady grew hostile.

Dude McCafferty had roomed in the same lodging house, but he was in the chips again, and back in the Broadway whirl. For Packy Gahagan was getting spots in the Garden and star bouts in the clubs.

Fletch lived in brooding solitude. He wouldn't even see Trina Forbes. He was breaking away from the past, from everything. He'd drag no one down with his failure.

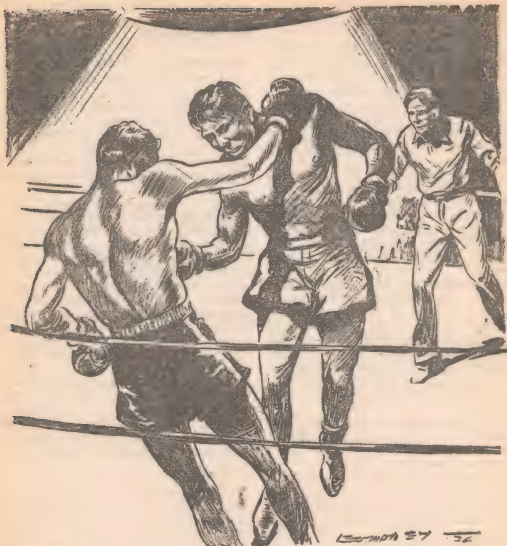
Then an item in the sports section of the *Express-Inquirer* jolted him out of his static routine.

Pop Skeggs, who made a million handling the gents who are hard to bruise, and lost his shirt in the stock market, is a bus boy working for fifteen a week at the Palace Lunch on Park Row.

Pop handled three champs, but the last time out he picked a chump tagged Fletch Brandell, a wizard in the training ring who turned green at the sight of a five-ounce glove.

Fletch felt a tightness in his throat. At the Palace Lunch, he looked through the window at Pop Skeggs mopping the floor. Fletch's shoulders drooped and he slumped away. He knew the old gentleman could get plenty of boys to manage. But not top-notchers. And Skeggs preferred a menial's job to fattening on the blood money of stumblebums. Fletch felt cheap. He'd cheated Pop out of his chicken farm.

A punch-drunk old-time ringster,



recognizing a brother of the cauliflower fraternity, waltzed up on rocking-chair heels. Fletch shelled out a dollar, which meant cutting down on his own rations.

"You're a pal, buddy," wheezed the glove-broken veteran. "Hope you win your next start. I'd 'a' been a champ, only I was robbed. I would 'a' licked Kid McCoy, too, only I wasn't right that night."

The derelict shuffled away.

Fletch smiled wryly. "Old boy, I'll soon be in your class," he thought bitterly. "I guess it isn't such a dreadful fate, being slap-happy and going around in a dream."

Fletch returned to the ring. Under the name of Jimmy Brand, he let promoters of out-of-town arenas toss him in with

anybody. They treated him like a washed-up pug. But he'd ceased to care. The spark was gone. He was just a dull laborer. Obsessed by the urge to pay back Pop Skeggs, he answered the gong too often.

He moved to another rooming house, so Skeggs couldn't find him, and sent the old manager most of the tough bucks he earned. He wrote that he had a good job, and that some day he hoped to spend a vacation on the chicken farm Skeggs would buy.

The pace was too swift, the mills too savage. In three months Fletch was little more than a brittle rind, ready for the scrap heap. The promoters ignored him. His money vanished. The rooming-house

proprietor threatened to lock him out. He faced the alternative of starving or hunting a breadline.

In this shabby, miserable condition, Fletch Brandell met Trina Forbes. Trina in a new caracul coat with a silver fox collar. Honey-colored ringlets were falling from under a black toque. A dazzling smile framed glistening teeth. The big city hadn't licked Trina. She was prettier than ever. Their eyes met and he shrugged.

"Fletch, why did you do it? Why did you let pride get the best of you?" she demanded in her direct manner. "There's no need of this. You know I would help."

Fletch forced a laugh and averted his eyes. "You got me wrong, Trina. Don't let my appearance fool you. I'm doing okay."

Trina shook her head. "You're broke, Fletch. I read about you and Pop Skeggs. Once you spoke of fighting under the name of Jimmy Brand. And I read of that fighter taking many brutal beatings. Oh, Fletch dear, I don't want to hurt you. But give up this hopeless ambition. You don't belong in the ring. You're an artist. Temperament is against you. You're too sensitive, too high-strung."

The kid smiled bitterly. "In other words, I'm a flop. That's right. Forget me, Trina. We used to be swell pals, but—but you've outgrown me."

"You make me furious!" cried the girl. "Doubting yourself! You're made for big things, Fletch. You'll be a fine artist."

"Might have done something with a brush," said Fletch, "in ten years or so, if I'd made money in the ring. But the world is full of my kind, Trina. People who would be top-notchers if—"

Against her protests, he got away from Trina as gracefully as he could. Loneliness engulfed him like a smothering wave. He would never see her again. She belonged in a Park Avenue penthouse, while he was shuffling back to a rabbit hutch of a room.

He didn't get into that room. The door was padlocked.

"I'm not runnin' a flop joint for bums," grated the mean-lipped proprietor. "You'll get your junk when you pay up. Go hunt a park bench."

Fletch spent the night in the subway. In the early-morning hours, he was able to stretch out. He lay in a stupor, drugged with the poison of dejection. Life

had always meant the glamour of a glorious future. Now it was an ugly thing of the drab present.

WHEN the new day began, Fletch wandered into the open. The cheerful sunlight startled him. He had ceased to believe that the world held anything but gloom. Hunger set up its insistent demand, but pride kept Fletch from the breadlines. He tried to get a job doing anything—washing dishes, cleaning windows, shoveling coal. But he was unshaved; he had slept in his clothes; and the agents marked him for a bum.

He was starved and his eyes were circled deep with exhaustion when Dude McCafferty, stopping in a twin-six car, motioned him with a jerk of his thumb.

"I've got a job for you, punchin' dummy," growled McCafferty. "I'm groomin' Gahagan for the lightweight eliminations, an' I want to sharpen his eyes on hamdonies like you. You're fightin' him at the Pioneer A. C. in Albany, next Thursday. I'll advance a little feed money."

Pride is a pushover for hunger, and Thursday night Fletch started for the ring to be hammered into a mangled caricature, so that a hated rival might perfect his timing. Passing Gahagan's room, he heard the fighter yelling at his manager.

"What's the idea of these here new trunks?" Gahagan demanded. "Gimme them old ones. Are you loony? Want me to lose? I won thirty-four starts with them black trunks, an' I'm not takin' no chance bustin' my winnin' streak, even with a canvas back like Brandell."

It is a superstition prevalent among many pugs that a string of victories will end if the fighter changes to new trunks.

Packy Gahagan slipped through the ropes in his faded, threadbare regimentals. "Hello, round-heel," he sneered at Fletch. "Why will you be like an old commutation ticket after this fight? Because you'll be all punched out."

Fletch's lips thinned. He swung out at the gong so geared up that he was shivering. Fever spots burned on each cheek. His stomach felt as though it housed a ball of burning pitch. He had no fear nor any thought save the mastering urge to glove his leering foe into dreamland. Yet he was as jittery as a hophead deprived of his drug.

Gahagan stormed in with a savage, headlong attack. He tried to bring Fletch down with a punch. But the kid's stabbing left staved off the rush. Gahagan smirked. He winked at McCafferty. He reeled drunkenly and showed his contempt by clowning.

That display of mockery was too much. Fletch saw red. He muttered savagely. His eyes went bleak. Madly he piled into Gahagan and ripped the leer off his face with a slashing left. His foe met the attack with the ferocity of a jungle beast. But Fletch had the range, and his fists were timed for destruction. He rocked Gahagan with numbing rights.

Those riveting thuds put the slugger's legs out of control. Gahagan fell into a clinch. He clung desperately. The referee yanked him away, and on the break, Gahagan got in a sneak punch to the body. Then it was the old routine again.

Fletch folded up. Fletch kissed the canvas, and struggled frantically to get his paralyzed legs under him. He beat the count and staggered into a tornado of leather.

The untamed Gahagan went kill-crazy. While the fans split their throats in a frenzy of hysteria, he bored into Fletch with murder in each fist. He hung the groggy kid on the hemp with a crushing right that would have brought an elephant to its knees. Fletch slumped onto the middle rope, arms dangling, eyes out of focus, helpless before Gahagan's merciless glove blast.

"Stop it! Stop it!" It was the white-haired Pop Skeggs yelling. The old man rushed down the aisle, with terror-stricken Trina Forbes hurrying after him.

The referee didn't stop it. The fans loved a slaughter-house spectacle. The kid was just a bum who didn't matter. He was rated as a human punching bag whose sole business in the ring was to take it.

Somehow Fletch got off the ropes. He reeled into Gahagan. The slugger's cold eyes gleamed with an unholy light. He played a cat-and-mouse game, cuffing in light punches until Fletch's legs steadied. Then he poured on the chloroform. Fletch went into a nose dive, but used the ropes to haul himself onto wobbly pins.

Gahagan measured him, his right poised for the death thrust. But he didn't let go the punch. Pop Skeggs flung through the ropes. He streaked across

the ring, his bony fist swooping up from the floor. Gahagan smacked his lips. He rammed onto a left. The leathered fist got Skeggs between the eyes. Spraddle-legged, the old man reeled against Fletch. Down they went, the two of them—to kiss the canvas.

IT was hours after the fight. His cuts patched, Fletch sat in a restaurant with Trina and Skeggs.

"I should have figured you out," the old manager was saying. "Why didn't you say something about your artistic leanings? I wouldn't have known yet, except for Trina."

"It had nothing to do with fighting," said Fletch.

"No?" exclaimed old Pop. "That artistic temperament just about ruined you. An artist has nerve reflexes that are too sensitive for the box fight racket. You've got more nerve than a marine, but you're a sucker for nerves. However, I've been a professor of sockology too long not to know a remedy. Not a cure, but a remedy."

The dullness left Fletch's eyes. "Is there—a chance. . . ."

Skeggs waved his hand. "We'll make a million, a cool million. You're a dressing-room fighter. The game is full of them, but not gents as high-gear as you. Even the brainless wonders get fidgety after a two-hour wait. I've known boys who turned down top spots to fight twice a week in preliminaries, because the gaff of the dressing-room wait was too hard on them."

Fletch nodded. "That's me. I always won a curtain raiser. But when I had to wait, I did too much thinking. Used to see myself getting messed up and going out of the ring on a stretcher. I was haunted by the faces of fellows who died after ring battles, men like Ernie Schaaf and Frankie Campbell and Frankie Jerome and Clever Sencio. I thought I was yellow."

"Yeah—you're about as yellow as a ruby," said Pop. "Nerves—nerves and imagination. Your nerves were tensed to the breaking point. Naturally a little tap on the solar plexus finished you. I'll never send you in the ring cold."

A month's rest, with most of each day spent in the open air, and Fletch went into training. He and Pop were living on the money the fighter had sent the

old manager, and there was enough to hire Steamboat Travis, the trial-horse welter, as a spar mate. A week's tune-up got the lightweight in shape for a top preliminary at a little club in Yonkers.

Then Pop Skeggs used his remedy. It was quite simple. In the dressing room, before ring time, Fletch and Steamboat pounded each other in a spirited session with the twelve-ounce gloves, with the heavier man under orders to concentrate on the mid-section.

Fletch had stamina enough for a savage age twenty-round fight, and when he slipped through the ropes, he was breathing easily and dripping perspiration. *Battle heat acted as a sedative for his nerves.* His foe planted a murderous right in his stomach. The blow bounced off the drumtight shield of muscles.

Fletch uttered an exultant shout. He scarcely felt the sledging punch. Almost delirious with happiness, he barged in, measured with a jab, and clocked his opponent out with a chin-lifting uppercut.

"I've been leveled by wallops that didn't have the steam of that haymaker!" exclaimed Fletch in the dressing room. "Good gosh, a little warm-up bout and then a slug in the darby has as much an effect on me as BB shot would have on a musk-ox!"

"Remember, son, it's only the remedy, not the cure," cautioned Pop. "High-tension nerves are hereditary."

"But aren't there others just like me?" asked Fletch. "How is it that I hold the world's record for kissing the canvas?"

"Simply because other scrappers with a nervous make-up like yours, didn't have the guts to keep plugging," said the old manager.

Those pre-fight sparring mills started a fictive meteor rocketing through the lightweight division. In five bouts Fletch pounded his way into a semi-windup at the Garden with a two-grand guarantee. He had time for his painting; he had time to go out with Trina; and he was boundlessly happy.

The night of the Garden tiff, Dude McCafferty sauntered in the dressing room, followed by Gahagan and a couple of heavyweight bruisers.

"Get out of here!" growled Fletch.

"What's wrong, baby?" purred McCafferty. "Ain't you happy to see your manager?"

"You had your chance with the lad,"

said Pop Skeggs. "Now you and your slug-nutty stooges do a vanishing act."

"Sure," said McCafferty. He drew out a folded document that made Fletch turn white. "Just wanted to remind you that I hold a contract on Fletch Brandell. I'm cuttin' in one-third on all your loot."

"You stole that!" yelled Fletch. "That's my copy. You took that from my room when I was away." But the kid was talking to a closed door, for McCafferty and his bodyguards had silently departed.

The kid trembled with rage. "When you and I broke up, I thought I was through," Fletch spoke to Pop. "I didn't think about that contract. Never noticed it was gone. Anyway, it won't do him any good. He gave you a receipt and a note of transfer."

Pop shook his head sadly. "I thought we were through, too. I tore up those papers. Didn't see any reason for keeping them."

After a workout with Steamboat Travis, the fighter entered the Garden ring and showed the fans the savagery they hadn't seen since the Dempsey-Firpo brawl. He put the sleeper on his opponent in the fifth. But it was a victory that brought no thrill, for at the business office, Fletch learned that Dude McCafferty had attached his cut.

POP SKEGGS appealed to the boxing commission and he took the case to court. It was no dice. McCafferty possessed a legal contract, and old Pop had neither record nor witness to prove that a conveyance had been made. The crook gave the glib explanation that he had paid the veteran to handle Fletch.

"The hound played a hundred-to-one shot when he stole your contract," Skeggs spoke savagely. "Now he doesn't have to turn a wheel for the next three years, and he'll collect a fortune."

McCafferty signed Packy Gahagan over to a dummy manager, and started to do the fronting for Fletch. But the new lightweight star balked at that, threatened to quit. So the Dude contented himself with hanging around the fighter's dressing room, smirking and jeering at Fletch's prefight bouts with Steamboat Travis, and collecting his blood money.

Fletch became the sensation of Fishtiana. He had a mule's kick in each hand, and none of his opponents answered the final bell. He was a natural for the space

writers. His canvas-kissing record was dug out of the files, and the human-interest scribes went to work.

The sports statisticians listed the parallels of Fletch Brandell, men like Bombarber Wells, a boxing marvel whose sensitive nervous make-up had deprived him of great ring success. They cited the opposites, the Bat Nelsons and Joe Grimms, who could stand inhuman punishment because they lacked imagination and had nerve reflexes below par.

The neurologists were called on for an explanation of the solar plexus, the large ganglia or collection of nerve cells located below the break of the ribs. Articles were written on the physiological reaction of a blow to these nerve fibers.

Because of its connection with a *sympathetic* chain of ganglia that ran through the system, the solar plexus, when paralyzed by a punch, could cause temporary paralysis in other parts of the body, the arms or legs.

Fighters were interviewed, and the lay world learned that cagy boxers fiddled in the first round to warm up, so that increased body heat would lessen the chance of a blow *numbing* a nerve center.

Through all the publicity and fanfare, Fletch continued to chalk up kayoes, always entering the ring protected by battle heat, and leaving after he'd put the opposition on ice. And the smirking McCafferty continued to collect.

Then the boxing fathers gave Fletch a chance to laugh. The commission was drawing up the list for the lightweight eliminations, and it decreed that Packy Gahagan would have to beat Fletch Brandell to get in the tournament.



McCafferty swaggered into the dressing room the night Fletch fought another semiwindup at the Garden. Steamboat Travis had stepped out, and the chiseler was free with his tongue.

"Work hard an' pay for a smart guy's limousine," McCafferty sneered. "After either this hamdonie or Packy wins the title, I'm buyin' a villa on the Riviera. Always wanted to join the high-noses."

"You're not collecting," said Pop.

McCafferty's lips curled. "Yeah? Is that so? Don't quote me, boys, but I collect either way—an' you hooligans know it."

Fletch shook his head. "You're not cutting in on a champ's wages, because neither Packy nor me get into the tournament unless we fight each other, and we're not fighting!"

McCafferty answered with a sneer. Then he saw the determination in Fletch's eyes, and he began to cajole and whine.

"I'll make a proposition," said Fletch. "I'll go through with the fight if you'll bet on Gahagan. Put my contract on Gahagan's chances, and I'll lay one lone dollar against it. If I win, I'll be shed of you."

The chiseler let out a yelp of indignation. Steamboat Travis came in, and the fighters got ready to spar. McCafferty said nothing. He sat on the rubbing table while Fletch and Travis swapped leather. The crook's eyes smoldered, then narrowed, and when Fletch got the ring call, they were gleaming with craft.

"I'll take that bet," he said softly. "If you want to raise the ante. It's the contract against a buck, plus another bet of five grand."

Fletch looked at Pop Skeggs, and their eyes locked. The old manager nodded.

"You've skinned me out of eighty-five hundred," said Fletch. "If you can cover that, it's a deal."

A sardonic smile played on McCafferty's mouth. He said: "Sure!"

THE lightweight won his Garden mill, and the match was made for the Gahagan go. National Auditorium got the bout, and the fight night fifteen thousand rabid fans packed the arena.

"I'm so happy, Fletch," Trina said before the fighter left for the dressing room. "Dreams have a habit of becoming forlorn hopes, but the one you've had

since childhood isn't failing you. And that's to—"

"Change your name to Mrs. Brandell," supplied Fletch.

Her color heightened and a soft glow added luster to her glistening eyes. Some one was coming down the winding corridor. Fletch had to hurry. He drew Trina to him, and then her lips were crushed against his. He held her close, thrilling to her loveliness.

Yet even in the ecstasy of the embrace, he visioned a nightmarish picture of the past—a glove-broken tramp shuffling into oblivion. He had been that tramp. And now another figure crossed his mind—the world's champion, eager-eyed and zestful, with a beautiful girl at his side. He had been the one; he would become the other. Fletch went to his dressing room, drunken with happiness.

McCafferty was there, but Fletch ignored him. There was no need for hostility. The contract and the money were in the hands of a reputable betting commissioner.

Sardonic and suspiciously taciturn, the crook hung around the dressing room. Not once did Pop turn his back. There was too much chance of a quick maneuver. A doped water bottle, a tack in the fighter's shoe, a sprinkling of lye in the gloves, and it'd be a suitcase bout for Gahagan. In the bag.

McCafferty stayed there during the preliminaries. Fletch and Steamboat went through their sparring ritual. The lightweight was neat, cute, with the reflexes of a cat and the venom of a cobra's bite in each mitt. Suddenly a madhouse din in the arena announced a knockout in the semi-wind-up. An attendant gave Fletch the shout. The kid wrapped his perspiring body in a thick robe and started out. Pop Skeggs blocked his way.

"Easy, son," the old manager cautioned. "This McCafferty gil acts like he knows something. Let's wait until Gahagan gets started. But don't lose your sweat."

McCafferty indulged in a mocking laugh and sauntered out. He was back shortly. "Get goin'," he growled. "The customers are beginnin' to foam over the delay. Packy's halfway to the ring."

Pop checked on that. The kid's eyes gleamed. Jabbing short punches at space, he quick-stepped into the arena. His foe,

(Continued on page 138)

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(Continued from page 136)

in a green robe, was already climbing the platform steps. Fletch grinned. Tonight he was the doctor. It'd be a quick operation, with plenty of anesthetic. He'd pay back a lot of lumps. And he wouldn't short Packy on the measure.

Fletch got a thunderous greeting, a Dempsey ovation. In the ring he glided to his corner like a prowling tiger. He was primed for a savage go. He felt marvelously primitive. He had boundless faith in the storehouse of devastating power that was his lean body. Not a trace of nerves threatened his defense. From a ringside seat, Trina waved her handkerchief. She, too, had faith in this reborn fighting man. He raised his gloved hand and nodded confidently.

A scorching tirade burst from Pop Skeggs. Fletch whirled. He choked off an impulse to yell and stiffened in the clutch of helpless rage. McCafferty had beat them to the punch. Gahagan wasn't in the ring.

The scrambled-faced man in the opposite corner was a decoy, Gahagan's leering, punch-tottery second. The green robe and trousers hoisted to the knees had turned the trick.

Fletch laughed and made a careless gesture. Nothing to get in a lather about. He was honed to a fighting edge that couldn't be dulled. Yet already his solar plexus was stirring to life like a poked hornets' nest.

"We're going back to the dressing doom!" yelled Pop. But, of course, they couldn't—not with fifteen thousand wild-eyed fans stamping and whistling for action.

"Shadow box!" Pop exclaimed. "Keep that sweat rolling."

Fletch went to work. Furiously he hurled himself into combat with the tobacco-fogged atmosphere. State of mind; that was the thing. Just hold the attitude and keep the system from cooling. But unwanted thoughts crowded in. The bet and the contract and the prospect of being saddled by a crook for the rich years of his box-fight career.

Violently he shook his head. Wrong tack that time. Those thoughts would steer him for the rocks, would sink him. He imagined he was the world's champ engaged in a charity exhibition. His imagination would work only one way—against him. Pop tried a machine-gun



barrage of trivialities—anything to occupy Fletch's mind. But already that

mind was fully tenanted with forebodings.

Fletch moved swiftly. He was perspiring. But the hectic spots on his cheeks and the rash on his chest weren't from exertion.

"I'll fight 'im!" he muttered over and over. "If his name was Joe Louis, I'd fight 'im! Hook 'im and cross 'im, one, two, bam, bam!"

He looked at Trina, and the terror in her eyes conjured up ugly memories of glove-shock and hunger. His nerves grew fangs that gnawed into his stomach.

Fletch's antics amused the fans, but before Gahagan appeared, many of the customers threatened to storm the box office for a refund. Gahagan finally showed up, a strutting chunk of arrogance. A towel over his thick shoulders and wearing his faded, age-worn trunks, he bounced into the ring and smirked at the booing crowd.

"Sorry to keep you waitin', whacky," he greeted Fletch.

The kid started toward Gahagan, fists raised. He couldn't help it. He was almost blind with anger. His foe's hands were naked. That meant at least five minutes for bandaging. Pop turned Fletch around.

"Forget it, son. This is just another fight. Remember that."

Fletch chewed at his lip and fought for control. But the more he struggled to ease up the nervous tension, the further he got on the losing side. When the referee called him out for instructions, Fletch was quivering like a man with a chill. Yet it felt as though each nerve fiber in his stomach was a burning taper cooking the raw flesh.

"I wanta get these here rules straight," said Gahagan in a raspy voice. "I don't figure to lose a round on a foul. Referee, is it fair to hit Brandell here? Like this. See?"

Gahagan's square-rigged right shot out. It grazed Fletch at the waist line and curved upwards, jarring the solar plexus. The blow didn't have much power. It didn't need much power. Not with a bundle of nerves ready to rebel at the slightest punishment.

Fletch uttered a frenzied shout. Madly he fought to ward off disaster. But his legs failed him, and he doubled up. Fletch was down. The fight hadn't begun, and he was out, face in the resin and kissing the canvas.

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THE mob let out a roar. A storm of boos poured down from the gallery. Clapping her throat, Trina Forbes leaped up, eyes wide with horror. Pop Skeggs sprang onto the platform outside the ropes. He was in a mood to strangle Gahagan.

"Where's the boxing commissioner?" he shouted. "Referee, throw that shamus out! I demand this fight on a forfeit!"

No chance of that. Gahagan was lavish with his apologies. He'd fooled no one. The trick was old, and it had been crudely performed. The slugger got a dressing down from the referee, and a commissioner promised a suspension. But the show had to go on.

Fletch was on his feet. Panic had possession of him. He was just a shell, and he knew it. The sensation in his stomach was that of a blow-torch being turned on it. He would fight. He'd pitch leather as long as he could stand up. But his numb legs and wooden arms gave no promise of success.

The timekeeper allowed Fletch a few extra seconds. McCafferty was leering through the ropes at the kid. Fletch's eyes were wintry. At the bell he stalked out gamely, but on his face was the look of a condemned man. His foe was on him in a hate-driven, pantherish onslaught.

Fletch slipped a wild right hand and blocked a drive to the midriff. He tied Gahagan up in a clinch, wrestling him across the ring, stalling for time. The referee yanked them apart. Gahagan hitched up his threadbare trunks and plowed in, gunning for sudden death. Fletch guarded his solar plexus and registered with a snaking left. That jab was always in his foe's face. He gashed Gahagan over the eye, puffed his lips, bloodied his nose.

Life pulsed into Fletch's legs. Maybe he had a chance. Maybe he'd get this mean-eyed hood. Back-water, tin-can it, wait until he was working smoothly under a fighting heat, and then slash into the slugger. Fletch traveled in reverse.

"Tryin' to establish a sprint record?" snarled Gahagan. "I'll rock you to sleep an' knock you flatter than a cop's foot!"

Fletch slipped on a wet patch near a corner, skidded off balance. Gahagan smacked his lips. Gahagan streaked in, eyes murderous. A red-leather thunderbolt crashed into Fletch's solar plexus. Flaming jets of pain shot through him.

But the agony was nothing compared to the torment of his mind. He sprawled on the canvas—through. He had less defense than an armless cripple.

Yet the bulldog hang of this gritty kid was undiminished. Enough life returned to his legs to get him up. It meant butchery, for Fletch's arms were dead. His guard was gone. He was an easy target.

Gahagan came on, sensing the kill. He slugged in a right hand. Desperately Fletch twisted. The deadly punch smashed against his shoulder. Fletch dropped. Pop signaled frantically. Fletch dragged his pain-torn body toward his corner. He struggled up ahead of the count. The bell rang.

"Nice generalship," praised his manager, shoving in the stool. "You'll get him, son. You bet! Skim through another round. Ride your bike. Then go hunting. Then show how you take the menace out of a hound."

"If he gets to me this time, I'll be ready for the laundry," gasped Fletch.

Gahagan reached him, went to work on Fletch's stomach, pounding him to the canvas. Fletch had come to the limit. He got up, because the fighting heart of him was still throbbing. The iron in his will tried to band together his tattered forces. But he lacked the power to break even an egg shell.

Gahagan crowded in. His old trunks, the sweat-rotted elastic giving away, slipped down. Fletch's senses reeled. His knees buckling together, the kid struggled against collapse. The slugger could have ended the fight with a punch. But he paused to hitch up his trunks. As he did so, Fletch started a right to Gahagan's jaw. The path was open.

He jammed the brakes on that punch, and leaped back. It was a superhuman effort, that leap. But Fletch managed to disguise the deadness of his legs.

"Fix Gahagan's trunks!" he yelled at the referee. "I could have leveled him with a sucker shot. I don't want to knock him out that way. Fix those trunks!"

Fletch's eyes burned feverishly. He wavered on the brink of failure. No one realized how little he had left. A jab would topple him, a push. And his legs were gone. If he hit the canvas again, it would be for the count.

Gahagan lunged at him. "I'll ring up your number quick, fella!"

(Continued on page 142)

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(Continued from page 140)

Again his hands dropped to his slip-
ping trunks. Fletch started another right,
stopped it.

"That's the second time, referee!"
yelled Fletch. "I can't hit a man when
his defense is gone!"

The kid could have screamed over the
referee's lack of response. His future
hinged on the official's action. The kid
couldn't have smashed a cream puff. But
the official didn't know that, and he *had*
seen Fletch halt the delivery of two
sucker shots.

Gahagan telegraphed his right. Fletch
swayed free and almost collapsed. If he
could only get a respite. He didn't need a
warming up now; he needed rest. Gaha-
gan sidled near. His gloves dropped to
his slipping trunks.

"Get over in that corner, Gahagan,"
ordered the referee. He spoke to the slug-
ger's second. "Hand up some adhesive
tape."

Fletch gasped. He was so used to the
breaks going against him that this
seemed unbelievable. The referee waved
the protesting slugger to a neutral cor-
ner. Fletch filled his lungs, choked back
a sob. Hysteria almost got him. The let-
down nearly caved him in. He'd been all
through, and now maybe—?

Gahagan swung out of the corner while
the referee was reaching for the ad-
hesive. "I had this roundheel headed for
Laughville," the slugger snarled, "an' I
ain't gonna get cheated." He had to hold
up his trunks as he streaked across the
canvas.

Fletch's heart trip-hammered. His
strength was coming back, but he needed
time—time. Gahagan was swooping a
haymaker up from the canvas. Fletch
moved back, trying not to stagger. His
heart was in his throat. One punch would
sweep away a fortune, cheat him of a
chance at the title, shackle his bondage to
McCafferty. Fletch's scalp twitched. His
spine felt like a robe of ice. The blood
in his arteries seemed to congeal.

"Gahagan! Come here!" snapped the
referee, tearing a strip of tape.

The slugger turned, sullenly obeyed.
Fletch swayed against the ropes. His
knees almost gave way. But his eyes
shone. The referee slapped the tape on
Gahagan's trunks and torso. It didn't

(Continued on page 144)



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(Continued from page 142)

take long, but it was long enough. He waved the fight on. The bell rang.

"Champ stuff!" exclaimed Pop Skeggs. "That bluff earned you an extra minute. You'll do, son."

"Bluff is right," said Fletch grinning. "I was all in. I couldn't have leveled him with a sledgehammer!"

But the next round Fletch didn't need a sledgehammer or anything except his capable dukes. The two minutes had freshened him. His nerves were under control. He whammed into Gahagan and jabbed him groggy. He forced the going, hitting so hard that his arms recoiled in their sockets.

Gahagan never had a chance. He couldn't get set, couldn't catch his stride, couldn't figure the sharpshooting style of this kid gone berserk. Fletch planted himself and belted him with bone-bruising smashes, one dynamiting wallop throwing him in position for the next punch.

A mangling hook sprouted a cauliflower on Gahagan's right ear. A trip-hammer jab played his nose. A poisonous cross loosened his front teeth and staggered him like a new-born colt. He tried to foul his way out. That drove Fletch in with a ferocity that made Gahagan wilt. Then the kid got in a right. It was a slashing uppercut, and it went wrist-deep into Gahagan's solar plexus. Gahagan kissed the canvas. That punch starched him stiff. There was no use counting. The referee raised Fletch's glove.

Fletch uttered an exultant shout. He didn't know clearly what happened after that. Everything was a blur, he was so boundlessly happy. He knew that Trina had come onto the platform, that he kissed her. Pop and Steamboat were hugging him, and each other, and anyone who got in the way. Fletch saw Dude McCafferty sink out. That score was settled, and the crook was through.

The fans were talking about the uncrowned lightweight champion. Life was opening up. It'd been a tough route, but now Fletch had just about everything—the love of a beautiful girl, money, his art hobby, and the mob's acclaim.

Fletch got through the man-pack milling in the ring to give the punch-frozen Gahagan a friendly pat. "You're a good fighter, mister," the kid said expansively, "only you can't take it in the darby!"

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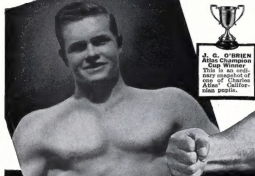
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FOOT-ITCH (ATHLETE'S FOOT)

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Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

It has been said that this disease originated in the trenches, so some people call it Trench Foot. Whatever name you give it, however, the thing to do is to get rid of it as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.

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The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows that it takes 20 minutes of boiling to kill the germ, so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

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